THREE-TIME WORLD FANTASY AWARD WINNER

DENNIS ETCHISON

GOT TO KILL THEM ALL

& OTHER STORIES

INTRODUCTION BY GEORGE CLAYTON JOHNSON

GOT TO KILL THEM ALL & OTHER STORIES

By Dennis Etchison

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Meet the Author

DENNIS ETCHISON is a three-time winner of both the British Fantasy Award and the World Fantasy Award and served two terms as President of the Horror Writers Association (HWA). Books include the collections *The Dark Country, Red Dreams, The Blood Kiss, The Death Artist, Talking in the Dark, Fine Cuts, Got To Kill Them All & Other Stories* and *It Only Comes Out at Night*, the novels *Darkside, Shadowman* and *California Gothic* and the anthologies *Cutting Edge, Masters of Darkness I-III, MetaHorror, The Museum of Horrors* and (with Jack Dann and Ramsey Campbell) *Gathering the Bones*. He has also written hundreds of scripts for *The Twilight Zone Radio Dramas* and is currently at work on a volume of new short stories.

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Foreword

This volume collects short stories that might be called ruthless, cold or even cruel. Yet I do not believe they are heartless. I prefer the word "unflinching." While varying considerably in style and subject matter, each leads to an extreme nexus of personal revelation — what William Burroughs called, in *Naked Lunch*, the moment when everybody sees what is at the end of every fork. I admit that extremes appeal to me as a writer; they are the Source of the Nile, so to speak, the most obvious material for drama — and melodrama. But I hope these tales express something more than sensationalism. As far as I am concerned they are about a white-knuckled determination to see the end of the night, to make it all the way through to the other side, no matter how shattering the experience may be. There is a curiously life-affirming high that comes from knowing one is alive in the midst of absolute darkness. Or, as Burroughs put it: "If you're still there after the fear then you got the courage, baby, that's all. If you're not, then you're dead."

— Dennis Etchison

Introduction: Disturbing Stories

by George Clayton Johnson

I want to talk to those reviewers among you about Dennis Etchison. I think his stories merit showcase attention from the mainstream. He is a literary treasure, as these stories of his demonstrate.

Consider "Sitting in the Corner, Whimpering Quietly." I first read it in a "little" magazine of limited circulation called *Nepenthe*, published at USC, where I discovered it alongside my own story "A Note From Underground." Etchison's name instantly went on my list of writers to learn from.

You see, I love the short story as an artform. Whether it be the result of an effortless afternoon's work or the labor of a lifetime of writing and rewriting to make it appear effortless, little stories like O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" or Jacob's "The Monkey's Paw" can hold sway over the human mind with all the concentrated power of a novel, gathered into the space of a few brief pages.

Many writers are world-famous chiefly for short stories — O. Henry has been called the American de Maupassant — and I must confess, if asked, that my greatest ambition is to produce a book of short stories as powerful and elegant as Ray Bradbury's *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, Matheson's *Born of Man and Woman*, Beaumont's *The Hunger and Other Stories* or Van Vogt's *Destination Universe*.

Etchison demonstrates how to take what might have been a sprawling tale if told in regular time sequence and compress it into one time and one place and one action. It is textbook stuff if you want to instruct a fledgling writer in the niceties of dramatic construction. It also demonstrates that if you can find the proper beginning of your story and the right tone of voice to tell it in, the rest unreels itself easily enough. Finding that place of beginning is a great part of the art of storytelling.

His structure is easily understood.

ACT 1: A man wants to be left alone. He goes to a quiet late-night laundromat merely to wash his clothes.

ACT 2: He unexpectedly meets a woman who tells him some very disturbing information (tests and obstacles).

ACT 3: He learns to his dismay that the world won't leave him alone and he must accept this fact.

Or, in a more stripped-down form:

Get your hero up a tree.

Throw rocks at him.

Get him down again.

Remembering with Ray Bradbury, "The plot is merely the footsteps of the protagonist left in the snow as he goes by in pursuit of his goal," you will see that Etchison's story, amazing in its brevity, is a clear demonstration that less is more.

In its first paragraph he puts you right there inside a late-night laundromat so substantial and solid that you could cut it into pieces and haul it away in a truck, an illusion managed with astonishingly few words. *A place of porcelain and neon lighting and whitewashed walls…the hot, stifling, humid dryer air…corner detergent dispenser…machine at the far end of the room…leaned my hands against the washer…cold, cracked cement floor.* That and an occasional significant word like "water" or "white light" or "steam" and you are in that laundromat. It stands vividly before your mind's eye as you experience the torment of the people trapped there with you, seeing everything with microscopic clarity and a growing sense of dread.

Dennis Etchison has been carving out such glittering gems of literary invention for over forty years and is still as good as he ever was. I find it interesting that he started out at the top of his game, which is a very tasteful, literate mixture of terror and pity, told with artful precision and attention to revealing detail, as this story will testify.

As you can see, "Sitting in the Corner, Whimpering Quietly" is not even a borderline fantasy. It could be happening right now.

Right here.

It's pure mainstream fiction, as are many of Etchison's most disturbing stories.

I think that after you finish "On the Pike," "No One You Know" and "Call Home," you will agree with me that Etchison deserves a shot at the big audience.

Etchison's writings have prompted many big-name writers to praise him fulsomely.

Stephen King antes up with, "One hell of a fiction writer."

Peter Straub calls that with "Absolutely one of horror's most exciting, most radical and most innovative talents."

C.L. Grant raises with, "The best short story writer in the field today."

But Karl Edward Wagner shoots the moon, saying, "The finest writer of psychological horror this genre has seen."

The late Karl Edward Wagner is more precise than the others, and perhaps more aware of what constitutes Dennis Etchison's greatest power.

Etchison is adept at psychological thinking.

Let us examine Karl Edward's term "psychological horror."

What can he mean?

Logical thinking compares two things and chooses between them, true or false, right or wrong, neither or both.

Psychological thinking (what Van Vogt might call "null-A") compares and chooses between many things. It assumes that no single "self" contains the truth — that it takes many selves (i.e., truths) in dialectical encounter with each other to reveal this fact, by demonstrating that each of the parties involved sees the truth differently and partially and that there are many smaller truths within the greater truth.

Psychological thinking assumes that there is more going on than meets the eye — that things have their inner meaning, and that things somehow are connected and controlled by a hidden hand to whom everything counts. Everything one says or does, everything one does not say or do, *everything* is counted and put for or against one. It is the nature of things. Things themselves make it so. In psychological thinking everything is mental. No real motive is logical. Reasons seemingly lack reason.

In a story of psychological horror, each of the characters (selves) sees things through a different state of mind. Each person perceives a different truth. The hidden hand is the presence of the author behind the scenes, arranging the events to happen so that the hidden meaning (the ending) will emerge and bring into focus similarities within the dissimilar, and perhaps expose a greater truth that is a composite, the reader's judgment having compared and evaluated the differing points of view in the conflict of the characters.

Like Bradbury, one of his strongest influences, Etchison has developed a recognizable voice and a vivid, literate style that reflects his own outlook on a society he finds threatening, merciless and baffling.

Although he is himself a child of the city and thoroughly educated to it, he remains alienated by what he sees — the fact that society, seemingly with malicious intent, doesn't care if it is irrational and poisoned and

doomed to a self-inflicted mortal wounding (see "The Machine Demands A Sacrifice," "The Pitch" or "No One You Know"). Etchison is part philosopher and part moralist driven to throwing up his hands in grief at the hopelessness of it while looking at it with fascination.

Unlike Bradbury, however, Etchison rarely himself the wounded victim voicing his outrage in his fiction (see Bradbury's "The Pedestrian"). Etchison is much too intellectual for that. Although he is *in* his story, as every author is, these atrocities are just things he has witnessed and is merely trying to call them as he sees them, with compassion and sorrow.

You can assume that one of the reasons Etchison is so knowledgeable about the short story is that he has read an awful lot of them. He is the accomplished editor of several notable horror/terror anthologies, including *Cutting Edge*, *Masters of Darkness I-III* and *MetaHorror*, for which he received a World Fantasy Award to match the one he had captured for "The Dark Country," from his first story collection of the same name — the volume that also contains the story I began by discussing here. More of his own dark fiction has been collected in *Red Dreams, The Blood Kiss, Talking In the Dark* and *Fine Cuts*. Other anthologies include *The Museum of Horrors*, for which he won a third World Fantasy Award, and *Gathering the Bones* (co-edited with Ramsey Campbell and Jack Dann).

Dennis Etchison also writes very suspenseful novels such as *Darkside, Shadowman, California Gothic* and *Double Edge*. These books are pure mainstream California Noir and, surprisingly, are as tightly-written, compressed and visual as his short stories. Someone ought to make movies of them.

While Dennis Etchison is still around and able to profit from public acknowledgement, I feel it is the critic's duty to note his brilliance and to call attention to his miraculous existence, which is what I am doing. If you are one who cares about these matters, join with me in recommending *Got To Kill Them All & Other Stories* to a wider audience, thereby granting Etchison the encouragement he deserves.

Sitting in the Corner, Whimpering Quietly

It was one of those bright places you never expect to find in the middle of the night, a place of porcelain and neon lighting and whitewashed walls. I walked in with my old army bag stuffed full of a month's dirty clothes and swung it on top of one of the long line of waiting, open washing machines.

A quarter to three in the morning.

And nobody in sight for miles and miles.

I let out a sigh, which not surprisingly turned into a yawn, and felt for the change in my pocket.

I didn't see her at first. That is to say, I knew she was there without turning around. I think it was the cigarette smoke. It cut a sharp edge through the hot, stifling, humid dryer air that hung so thick in the laundromat you felt you could stick out your finger and jab a hole in it.

"Well, he finally got what he wanted."

I moved along the wall to the corner detergent dispenser. It was very late and I couldn't sleep and I had come here to be alone, just to have something to do and to be left alone to do it, and I was in no mood to try my hand at winning friends and influencing people.

I heard water running in the sink next to me.

"That's what he thought, all right." Her voice came very close to me now, going on as if picking up a running conversation we might have been having.

I turned my head just long enough for a quick glance at her.

She was young but not too, twenty-nine going on forty, and pretty, too, but not really very. She had long hair hanging down to the middle of her thin back, with blond streaks bleached in, *très chic,* you know, and one of her phony eyelashes was coming unglued in the warm, wet air.

"A house in the Valley, two cars—no, three—paid vacation in the Virgin Islands, and a son, yeah, a little Vladimir Junior to carry on his glorious family name. Just like he always wanted. But that was *all* he wanted—that's the part they never tell you in front."

She dropped the butt of her Pall Mall and lit another at once, pulling long, hard drags down into her lungs.

"Last week the kid took the gun from the closet and walked up to me in the kitchen," she continued, starting to hand-wash a sheet in the sink. "Pointed it right at my head and said, 'Bang, you're dead, Mommy.' 'Well,' I

said, 'are you gonna do it or not? Don't ever point one of those things at someone unless you're gonna use it.'

"So he did. The kid pulled the trigger. I didn't think he had the guts. 'Course it wasn't loaded. That *really* pissed me off. It was just like Vladimir, not teaching him what it means to be a—but what would his dad know about that? About what it takes to be a man."

She scrubbed at the soiled sheet, pausing to jerk a wet hand up to move a strand of hair away from her face. I couldn't help taking a better look at her face then. It was like the rest of her, young and yet old, drawn and tight, made up expensively even now, in the middle of the night, though obviously in haste, and tired, and blank. For a second then, overpoweringly, I had the belief that she was the same young/old woman I had seen seated in the window of a beauty salon in Beverly Hills once; and later, in a cocktail lounge with another girl, waiting, with long, sharp fingernails the color of blood, French-inhaling a Marlboro and with a look on her face that told you she had a hundred-dollar bill in her purse. And that she was waiting. Just waiting.

She picked up her Pall Mall with a wet thumb and first finger, drawing hard.

I noticed the clock on the wall: three o'clock.

"That was when I got it. All these years, trying to figure a way to teach him and that God damned kid of his something."

I fed a couple of nickels into the detergent machine.

She paused long enough to take a couple more lengthy hits from her Pall Mall. It was so quiet you could hear the sound of the smoke blowing out into the white light.

"So tonight he comes home and makes the pitcher of martinis, as usual, and goes into his room and closes the door. I go to the door and ask him what the hell's wrong *this* time. He says he doesn't know. He just wants me to leave him alone."

She laughed startlingly, hoarsely.

"Okay, hot shot, I'll leave you the hell alone, I think. You wanna come home from your fucking office looking like a corpse again tonight and lay around until you fall asleep for the zillionth time? All right, I'll let you!

"We'll find out if that's what you really want.

"Only first you and that little pussy of a son of yours are gonna get a lesson you'll never forget."

She turned on the water full force. It gushed out, flooding the basin faster than it could empty.

"Who ever said if you wash it in cold water it'll come out? *Damn.* Why the hell did I have to give him the striped sheets, anyway?

"So I wake the kid up. It doesn't matter—he's awake, and the bed's all wet as usual. I ask him if he remembers what I taught him.

"It takes a minute or two, but he finally catches on, the dumb little bastard.

"So I go get the bullets down and tell him to go in there and prove to me that he remembers what it was I beat the shit out of him for last week…."

I started to dump my stuff into a machine at the far end of the room. Then, all of a sudden, the thread of what she had been saying got through to me.

I turned back to look at her.

She was grinding a bar of soap into the sheet now. At the edges the spot was a thick brown, almost black, but at the heart I noticed it was still a deep, gummy shade close to the color of her nails as her fingers flashed violently around the material. The steam was rising up from the basin to surround her.

I closed my eyes fast.

Outside, a car came suddenly from nowhere and passed hurriedly by, swishing away down the empty boulevard.

She finished the story. I didn't want to hear it, tried to block it out of my ears but she told it through to the finish. It didn't matter to her. She had never been talking to me anyway.

My eyes jammed shut, harder and harder, until I saw gray shapes that seemed to move in front of me. Never before in my life up to that moment could I remember feeling so detached, so out of it. I leaned the heels of my hands against the washer. The quarter slipped from my fingers, clanked against the enamel and hit the cold, cracked cement floor.

The last thing I heard her saying was:

"…So afterward I tell the kid to go back to bed, to go to sleep, just to go the hell to sleep, but he can't. Or won't. He just sits there on the floor in the corner, the gun still in his lap, whimpering quietly. That was how I left him, the little sissy…."

Disgusted—tired and sick and disgusted out of all memory and beyond all hope—I forced my things back into the bag and stumbled out of the

laundromat. She said something after me but I didn't want to hear what it was.

I pulled my coat up around my ears. I was starting to shiver. I snorted, at no one in particular, at the night and all the people in it, everywhere, the stupid, unthinking people who don't know enough to leave a man alone, just to leave you the hell alone the times when you need it most. There was no place left for me to go, no place at all anywhere in the city. And so, breathing steam, I made it away from there as fast as I could, heading off down the street in the same direction as the car and blinking fast, being careful not to step on any cracks, all the way back to my room. My quiet room.

The Walking Man

It was one of those long, blue evenings that come to the Malibu late in the year, the water undulating up to the beach like some smooth, sleepy girl moving slowly under a satin sheet. I must have been staring, because the bartender leaned over and pushed the empty glass against the back of my hand.

"Another?"

"Vodka," I reminded him. The sky, out by the point that shelters the Colony, was turning a soft, tropical orange of the kind one expects to see only on foreign postage stamps. The edge of the water lapped the pilings below the restaurant. An easy, regular rhythm, like the footsteps outside on the pier.

He reached for a dry napkin. "Live around here?"

"A few months," I told him. It was still true, for the moment, at least. I hoped he would let it pass. I didn't want to go into the alimony and the rest of it, not now.

He had the Rose's Lime Juice in his hand. The way he handled it, I could see he hadn't been at this too long. He was young, still in his twenties; I wondered how he had got the job with all that sun-bleached hair. "Should've seen it back about May, June," he said. He picked up a cherry, one of the green ones, but I held up my hand and he put it back. "All that sand out there?"

I turned back to the window and looked with him.

"Rocks," he said. I heard the rough ice cubes drop into the glass.

"Right."

"Out there, I mean. Boulders like you never seen. Like the moon or something. Five, six feet of sand must've washed in over the summer."

He was right. I remembered the beach below the sun deck of our newly leased house: the sand slick as a wet peach as far as we could walk at low tide, and piled in solid around the posts; and I remembered waking one morning to find it gone, washed out from under us during the night, everything but the rocky underpinnings, all the way out to the tide pools where mussels held to the sharp erosions, crusted hard against the beaks of the circling gulls. Now, the season and the waterline changing, it was all coming back. I remembered, and he was right.

The drink was up. I started on it. The kitchen wouldn't be serving for another hour and the room was still empty, even here at the bar. There were a couple of too-young waitresses making like they were busy, wiping off the plastic menus and refilling the little bowls with sugar packets. I sat watching them in the light of the sunset, their figures silhouetted against the empty panes, but I knew all about the game and I didn't feel up to it. They looked like nervous laughs and weekends at Mammoth and a taste for Cold Duck, and when they joked at each other under their breaths the sound came to me above the piped-in music: telephone voices just out of the shower, brittle as window glass, unexpectedly cold, and transparent.

There wasn't much left of the drink so I turned on the stool for one last view. I knew I couldn't see my place from here, buried past a stretch of big rich ones, but I tried just the same.

"Which one?"

The voice was so flat, so toneless the thought occurred that it might have been my own. I drained the glass against my teeth and put it down. The bartender was twisting some bottles of Bud in shaved ice. He flicked his eyes in what I took to be the direction of the color TV, but it wasn't on. It never was. I leaned in, trying to see past the end of the bar.

She was back there at the small table, the one you never notice against the wood. I wouldn't have spotted her at all except for her eyes, the way the whites reflected the dim light coming through the stained glass porthole on the side door. They were huge, very wide-set, as if drawn by a Forties comic strip artist; I couldn't place the style. They were not looking at me. I squinted anyway, trying to see into the shadows. But she was not looking at me.

Something small and white lifted to her lips. No, I thought, or maybe I muttered it. Not this time, and I did not reach for the matches on the bar.

Then she did something I wasn't ready for, something that had a little class, just a little, at least. She went ahead and lit the cigarette, without the look, the wait. And suddenly I felt bitter in the throat at myself as well as the game, at the whole thing, just the whole damn thing.

"The lady," said the bartender. "I think she's talking to you."

She still wasn't looking at me. "What did she say?"

"Don't ask me, man," he said, and he winked. That settled it for me. No way.

"No way," I said.

He shrugged. I climbed off the stool. He was watching but I wasn't going to give him the next act. "Set up one more," I told him. "I'm going to the head."

"Sure," he said. You know how he said it.

I took a couple of steps. Then I remembered about the head. (A varnished plaque on the door: BUCKS.) It was back there, down a hall between the cigarette machine and the pay phone. The hall next to the small table.

Well, the hell with her.

I passed the table. I was about to turn into the hall, but I couldn't resist checking her out, just once. Call it a flaw in my character, an itch in the place you know you can't scratch but can't stop yourself from trying, every time.

There was something I recognized. Maybe she reminded me of the types in the class Beverly Hills saloons with the Boston ferns hanging from the ceiling, the ones I've seen as I passed by outside the glass: twenty-nine going on forty, skin diet-taut, a streak bleached into the hair; a look that says that she's got a C-note folded in her bag and that she's waiting, just waiting. This one had the expression, I guess, but that was all. Her hair was black, no streak. Not shiny black, but dull, more like what's left in the grate a minute before the fire goes out. Drawn back along the sides of her head, but not tight, not a cheap face-lift, not like she cared. Her skin was white, but not kept from the sun like some courtesan; it was the kind of pale you get when you don't care enough to go outside.

And there were the eyes. They set me on edge. They were too extreme, like something you learn never to expect in this life: gilt on the lily, egg in the beer, too much, much too much for the way they tell you things are supposed to be.

"Which one," she said, again. She said it that way, not a question, not anything.

"Don't worry. You couldn't see my house if you tried." *Don't worry. You couldn't see my house if you tried.* I said it, I thought it, I don't know which.

"Will you help me?"

She did not bother to raise her head.

"Which one? Which one of those people?" she continued.

Now I knew we weren't on the same wavelength. I had no idea what she was talking about.

Her eyes were fixed somewhere close to the line of houses. The pier, I gathered. A few tourists were out on the boards, strolling up and back, back and up. They reminded me of shooting gallery targets, rolling along on tracks and wobbling a little in the breeze. Except that I could hear footsteps, even here.

"What about them?" I asked.

"They remind me of mannequins." She stubbed out her cigarette, almost new. "Do mannequins have wheels, do you know?"

I was standing there looking down at her, studying her face. It was an exaggerated triangle, inverted—like the Sub-Mariner, I think, if you remember. Then again, maybe it was only the perspective. "That's a funny thing to say," I said.

"Which one would you kill," she said. Another non-question. "Say you could name your price. Any one you choose."

I thought about it, I don't know why. She was making some kind of point, I guess. I wanted to hear what it was. "You talk like they're not even human," I said.

She raised her face a few degrees. Her chin was really tiny, almost lost below her enormous lower lip, which was puffed out in a perpetual pout. More than anything else, I saw her wide, pallid forehead. She had not arranged her hair to hide it.

"And we are?" she said. "Is that what you mean?"

I leaned on the rail and watched the water bringing sand up to the shoreline. Bringing it up or taking it away.

"Say you had to choose."

I pivoted, startled but not surprised. She had come up like a ghost, one of those with sheet trailing and no feet below to sound the boards. I turned back to the rail. The gulls were swooping on the pearled waters, trying to pick up fish that had come too close to shore, into the tide pools between the green rocks where they didn't belong.

I heard her release a long, shuddering breath. With effort, her voice low, she said, "If you won't say it, I'll say it for you. You can't choose because it wouldn't make any difference. You can't tell them apart."

I shut my eyes and held them shut for a while before I opened them. Shadows on the sand. People on the beach. Figures chasing a ball, picking driftwood, unleashing dogs, rolling trouser legs, walking hand in hand. I couldn't see their faces from here. Each time my eyes opened the configuration was different, the figures shuffled, interchanged.

But I was letting myself go. It was easy. Too easy.

I pressed my eyelids shut again, so tight I saw dull light.

Thinking: well all right, why not, maybe this one is different, I pulled myself up.

Finding the strength, blinking, I faced her with eyes open. I reached down, steeling myself and relaxing, setting and going with it. Hands on the rail behind, the nails whitened moons, they must have been, I heard myself saying, "What is it you really want?"

I left the lights off.

She wanted me, but not desperately. She gave, but not to lose herself. She took from me—received and did not grasp. The moment did seem to be out of time, but passed to the next moment as easily as the passing of a breath. I began to think of her as beautiful. She might have been anyone. She was familiar somehow; I had never known her like. I passed from her back into myself as easily as a breath is taken and released. I was aware of the wind outside, the lights in the windows of other houses going on and off along the point, the white sound of the waves, the passing and repassing of slapping feet on the beach, drunken laughter beyond the deck. The absence of laughter. The easy silence, and the night.

"Who's out there?"

"What? Nobody, probably. It's late."

"I don't mean the beach. I thought I heard someone walking. Outside, there."

She meant the front of the house.

"There's nothing out there but the highway. Not even a sidewalk. You know that."

I watched her in the moonlight from the window.

"All right, what is it?"

She shifted to her side, her hair lifting away from the pillow in long black tendrils. "Sometimes there's a man, walking."

I reached for my shirt. "Smoke?"

"Mm."

But before I could get to my cigarettes, she had one in her mouth. I don't know where she got it. I gave her a light. I saw the twisted end, the way it caught and burned unevenly.

She filled her lungs without blinking and held out the joint.

I hesitated, but only for a second. The last couple of times it had made me remember too much, had made the ache come again. I took it. It tasted like sweet garbage, but it went down easy.

She lay back. Her eyes were staring. I seemed to be seeing her from above: the dark hollows over her collarbone, her breasts, the way they did not flatten when she lay on her back, the way her breath moved below her ribs, the tangle between her thighs, glistening under me….

"How do you know no one is there?" she said.

"Because—" I flopped onto my back, took another lungful, executed a quick sit-up. I crossed the living room, drew open the top half of the door to the sun deck and leaned out. The tide was low, a good fifty feet from the supports, and nothing was moving but a line of sandpipers between the naked rocks. "Because there's nobody. On the beach or anywhere else around here." With irritation. "What's the—" *matter with you*, I started to say.

"How do you know?" she repeated.

My mouth opened. It stayed open, my jaw scissoring as I came back to the big pillows. I squatted next to her on the rug, almost over her. "I need some more of that, I guess," I said, reaching for the joint, "before I can pick up what you're trying to say."

She punched up the pillow.

"We were talking about something, back on the pier," she said. "Remember?"

Though she would not meet my eyes, I stared at her. I thought her mouth began to move, but it was only her chin, receding further.

Get it out, I thought. The rest of it, so that I can know what to think of you, before I let myself think any more of you than I do. "Come on." Or do you want to go back into hiding in that bar, I thought, do you really? Is that all you want? "Damn it," I said, "you're—" spooking me, I thought. *Really*.

"I'm what?" She rose up on the pillow.

"Nothing."

"That's what I thought," she said, slumping.

"Oh God."

"All right," she said. "Only first you have to tell me something."

Let this be good, I thought, and let it be quick.

"Just this," she said. "When was the first time you heard the voice?"

I didn't say anything.

"For me," she said, her tone unchanged, "it was only after I started having the dreams. They got so bad that for a while I was afraid to go to sleep. But then, the first time I heard it, I was finally able to give up the ghost. Just like that. I woke up laughing, and I knew the world was mine."

I got up. I sat down. Then I got up again and went around the bookcase to the kitchen. The water felt good on my face. I tried to make it last.

"Well?" she asked. "Will you do it?"

I lit a cigarette. It was getting cold. I wanted to close a window, but none was open.

"You know you've thought about it. Admit it. It could happen anywhere. In the middle of the night, in a place you've never been before, a place where no one knows you. Glendale, Upland, Paso Robles, it doesn't matter. Anywhere at all."

Her voice rose half an octave, like a violin string tightening, winding up. She took a deep breath.

"You're driving down an empty street at three o'clock in the morning, say. All the TV sets are off. The police cars are parked at the House of Pies. You don't know where you're going. You turn corners. Then you see someone, sooner or later you always do. He could be anyone. He's walking alone, hurrying home under the trees, the leaves are cracking under his feet like bones. You cut the lights and as you pass you feel the gun in your hand and your finger on the trigger and—and it doesn't matter.

"Or maybe you wait until he crosses the street. You dare yourself not to hit the brakes, and—and all there is is a sound. And he's gone. He never was. And it doesn't matter."

Her voice was rhythmic, incantatory.

I let her go on.

"Or in an all-night laundromat. And the knife is there in your pocket, the way you knew it would be when you needed it. Or you feel your hands on a

throat in the back row of a movie theater. Or standing on a cliff over the rocks. And your hands want to push. Or under a pier with only the waves, and you see him and suddenly you feel the rock in your hand. And it doesn't matter. Somewhere, anywhere, even right here, why not? It doesn't matter. In the middle of the night with no one to see… "

I locked my knees. I dug my heels into the jute carpeting and set my back against the wall.

"So why don't you?" I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Why don't you?" she said quickly.

The cigarette tip made a track in the air. I watched it.

"Because you've never understood the feeling," she continued, "until now. It's never been verified. You might be crazy. It's easy to think that. One alone is weak. But two is a point of view."

Her words began to lose all meaning. They might have been sounds made by a pointed stick on a fence at midnight.

"So name your price," she said.

"Why?"

"Oh, the money will make it easier the first time. It gives you a reason you can live with. That's only practical."

Practical.

"Five thousand," she said.

"Why?"

"Ten. Oh, I have it, don't worry."

"But why me?"

"Your eyes," she said. "The way you kept looking around every time somebody walked by on the pier. As if you almost expected to see yourself."

I just looked at her. I don't know if she could see me.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars," she said. "I can get it. Everyone has his price. *Doesn't he*."

I tried to walk. The room moved before me. I saw her as if from a great distance, from the ceiling? The top of the head, the part in the hair like a white scar, the high cheekbones, the bony shoulders, the hands holding the knees, the knees like second breasts, the knuckles like worn-down teeth. I moved past her. Outside, a full moon hung over the water.

"Listen," I heard her say, "you won't even have to choose. That's the hard part, isn't it? Well, I've already found one for you. There's one I always see,

a man with his dog, back there between the rocks. You'll know him—the dog's crippled. Always the same time, every night. And he's old. It will be so easy. No one will see. Use anything you want."

For a time, I don't know how long, I balanced there. The white sound was blowing in from the ocean.

"You see?" she was saying. "I need someone. I need to know, to be free and know that I'm free. You will be free, too. We will be the fortunate ones, because we'll know no remorse."

I faced her.

"The voice," she said, "remember the voice."

She reached to touch me.

"Everybody has a price," she said.

I had not realized until that moment how unfeeling she was. Her touch was almost cruel; her words were almost kind.

"That may be true enough," I said slowly.

"How much is it worth, then?"

"Nothing."

Then I just waited.

"And we are?" she said.

I took a long time trying to think of a way to answer her.

Now the circling gulls were gone; only a single kingfisher remained to patrol the waters.

I walked, touching each post on the pier.

At first the sound was so familiar I didn't notice it.

The sound of footsteps.

Without looking up, I stopped by the rail.

The footsteps stopped.

Below the pier, the skin of the sand had been polished to an unearthly sheen. I stood there, looking down.

"You got a light, by any chance?" said a voice.

It was a man I had seen walking the boards earlier.

I told him I didn't.

"Don't ever depend on these throwaway lighters," he said, clicking the wheel uselessly against the flint. "Once they're empty, they're not worth a dime."

He pitched it underhand into the water. It fell end-over-end, disappearing from sight.

"The bar has matches," I said.

He made no move to leave. Instead he leaned his back against the rail.

I shifted and glanced around.

Back at the bar, on the other side of the glass, bodies were moving, rearranging. I couldn't help but notice. The filtered moonlight caught one face out of all the others, at the small table by the hall to the cigarette machine and the pay phone.

I must have stared for a long time. Then I got it, finally.

Kirby.

I said it, I thought it, I don't know which.

"Who?"

"Kirby," I said, snapping my fingers again. He was old enough to remember, so I went on. "A comic book artist, back in the Forties. See that girl in there, the one with the face like a broken moon? She looks like she was drawn by Jack Kirby." A portrait of Poe's sister, in fact, but I didn't say that.

There was no reason he should have answered. He probably thought I was crazy.

I turned oceanward again.

The moonlight had broken up on the surface of the water now, like so much shattered mercury. I watched the edges of the tide foaming around the pilings, bringing a wet, white reflection to the hidden rocks.

His elbow was almost touching mine. He was already off-balance. It wouldn't have taken much to send him backwards over the edge.

I said to the man, "How would you like to set someone free for me." It was somewhere between a statement and a question. "Lean on, snuff. For money, of course. It'll have to be on the installment plan. But for her, I'll come up with a hell of a down payment."

I felt a laugh starting, deep down.

"Come on, come on," I said, "what's your price, man? Everybody has his price, doesn't he?"

"Yeah," he said right off. He had been following it. "Only sometimes," he said, playing it out, "it may not be worth paying."

I managed a look at him. His face was leathery, but the skin around the eyes was still soft. He squinted, and a hundred tiny crinkles appeared.

"Before you say any more," he said, "I ought to let you in on something. I guess I ought to tell you that I'm what they call a private investigator."

I couldn't read his expression.

"I also ought to give you a free piece of advice," he said. "You seem like a decent guy. Do yourself a favor. Drop it right now."

"What?" I tried to get a fix on him. "Is she a client of yours or something?"

"The husband, pal," he said confidentially.

"I think you're trying to tell me something. So who is he?"

He gazed off down the beach. He gave a nod, meaning, I figured, one of the big stilt houses, the ones with the floodlights aimed at the waves.

Then I noticed something moving.

It looked like a man. I watched as the figure passed between the pilings, laying a long, stooped, crooked shadow over the stones.

"He looks old," I said.

"And rich," said the detective, if that's what he was. "Filthy, like Midas. Otherwise I wouldn't be bothered. Domestic surveillance isn't my style. Can't take the hours anymore."

"Wait a minute," I said. "The old man. The husband." It stuck in my throat. "He has a dog, right? And he takes it for walks. Same time, every night?"

"Take a look. Christ, the mutt's only got three fucking legs. Can you beat that?"

I couldn't.

"He's got an idea she's a tramp, you get the drift? So I tail her. Everywhere. I should blush to tell you how much he pays me. But all I got to do is wait and watch…."

"No, I can't beat that, man," I said. "I really can't."

And started walking.

And heard footsteps on the pier, *footsteps echoed as from far below,* my footsteps, saw shoes falling on the boards, *my shoes when I looked for them seemed very far away* my shoes, *as I watched the water, then the sand under the pier*, the cracks between the planks shuttering over the sand, *and I saw as from a height, the distance growing, from all angles, directions, lengths, myself there*, the sand pocked with breathing holes leading to sand

crabs, remains of mussels, clams, oysters, lobster, squid, anemones, puffers, eel, sea snakes, sharks, rays, barracuda, lungfish, trilobites, sea spiders, spiny horrors, sentinels buried in the layered scape, *as I approached the bar*, footsteps passing the split moorings, *the black layers on the roof*, drying ropes frayed by the sojourns of rats from out the tumbling foundations, *the high tilted windows, their panes pulsing with the passing of the tide, the frames beginning to crack*, footsteps, *giving in, giving out*, my footsteps *the laughter and the absence of laughter* nearing the wooden buildings, the restaurant, the bar *beating like wings against the glass.*

And I watched her.

The Pitch

The third floor came down to meet him.

As far as he could see, around a swaying bunch of sphagnum moss that was wired to one of the brass fire nozzles in the soundproofed ceiling, a gauntlet of piano legs staggered back in a V to the Kitchen Appliance Department like sullen, waiting lines of wooden soldiers. C-Note shuddered, then cursed as the toe guard clipped the rubber soles of his wedgies.

He stepped off the escalator.

He turned in a half-circle, trying to spot an opening.

A saleswoman, brittle with hairspray, dovetailed her hands at her waist and said, "May I help you, sir?"

"No, ma'am," said C-Note. He saw it now. He would have to move down alongside the escalator, looking straight ahead, of course, pivot right and weave a path through the pink and orange rows of the Special Children's Easter Department. There. "I work for the store," he added, already walking.

"Oh," said the saleswoman dubiously. "An employee! And what floor might that be? The, ah, Gourmet Foods on One?"

If it had been a joke, she abandoned her intention at once. He swung around and glared, the little crinkles fanning out from his eyes, deepening into ridges like arrows set to fire on her. Her make-up froze. She took a step back.

A few women were already gathering listlessly near the demonstration platform. Just like chickens waiting to be fed. Ready. All angles and bones. *May I help you, sir?* I'll plump them up, he thought, swinging a heavy arm to the right as he pushed past a pillar. A small ornament made of pipe cleaners and dyed feathers hooked his sleeve. He swung to the left, shaking it off and heading between tables of rough sugar eggs and yellow marshmallow animals.

They looked up, hearing his footsteps. He considered saying a few words now, smoothing their feathers before the kill. But just then a sound pierced the Muzak and his face fisted angrily. It was *Chopsticks*.

He ducked backstage through the acetate curtain.

"They don't even notice," he wheezed, disgusted.

"Why, here he is," said the pitchman, "right on time." Seated on a gold anodized dining room chair borrowed from the Furniture Department, he was fooling with the microphone wired around his neck and waiting blankly for the next pitch. "All set to knock 'em dead, killer? What don't they notice?"

"They don't notice my hand goin' in their pocketbooks in about fifteen minutes." C-Note sprawled over the second chair, also upholstered in a grained vinyl imprinted with lime-green daisies.

"Ha ha! Well, you just rest your dogs for now," said the pitchman. He spooled out a length of black plastic tape and began dutifully winding another protective layer around the microphone's coat hanger neckpiece.

C-Note saw that all was ready: several cartons marked Ace Products, Inc., barricaded either side of the split curtain and behind the pitchman, leaned against two large suitcases, were lumpen bags of potatoes, a pried-open crate of California lettuce and a plastic trash can liner brimming over with bunched celery and the wilted cowlick tops of fat hybrid carrots. C-Note flexed his fingers in preparation, turned one wrist up to check his watch and pulled a white-gloved hand through his lank hair. He was not worried; it would not fall in his eyes, not now, not so long as he did not have to lean forward on a stool over another scale. Sometimes he had thought they would never end. Up and down, down and up.

"We got fifteen units out there," said the pitchman, "another forty-eight in the box here. I don't think you'll have to touch 'em, though. The locations we do our best is the discount chains. You know."

"Sure," C-Note lied, "I know."

"These *ladies*—" He overlaid the word with a doubtful emphasis. "—They're all snobs, you know?" The pitchman cut the tape and then paused, eyeing him as he pared dirt from under his fingernails with the vegetable knife.

C-Note stared at the man's hands. "You want to be careful," he said.

"Check, kid. You got to slant it just right. But you can sell anything, can't you? You talked me into it. I believe you."

That was what C-Note had told him. He had come up to the platform late yesterday, hung around for a couple of sets and, when the pitchman had scraped off the cutting board for the last time and was about to pack up the rest of the units in the big suitcases and carry them out to the station wagon, he had asked for a job. *You want to buy one? Then don't waste my time.* But

C-Note had barged through the curtain with him and picked up a unit, covering one of the kitchen chairs as if it had always been his favorite resting place. As he had done just now. And the pitch. The pitch he auditioned was good, better even than the original mimeo script from Ace. If he pitched as well out there today in front of the marks, the head pitchman just might earn himself a bonus for top weekly sales. Of course, C-Note would never know that. The pitchman had agreed to pay him cash, *right out of my own pocket,* for every sale. And how would C-Note know how much commission to expect? He would not bother to go to the company, not today and not next week, because that would mean W-2s, withholding—less take-home. And the new man looked like he needed every dime he could lay his hands on. His white-gloved hands.

"Here you go," said the pitchman. "I'll hold onto your gloves. Shake out a little talcum powder. That way you won't go droppin' quarters."

"The gloves," said C-Note, "don't come off." And the way he said it told the pitchman that he considered the point neither trivial nor negotiable.

The pitchman watched him bemusedly, as if already seeing juice stains soaking into the white cloth. He stifled a laugh and glanced aside, as though to an audience: *Did you catch that?*

"Well, it's two o'clock, pal. I'm goin' up to the cafeteria. Be back in time to catch your act. You can start, uh, on your own, can't—?"

"Take it easy," said C-Note, waiting.

"Don't worry, now. I'm not gonna stick you with no check. Ha ha. Cash!" He patted his hip pocket. "Not every demonstrator's that lucky, you know."

"I appreciate it. But I'm not worried about the money."

"Yeah." The pitchman handed him the neck microphone. "Sure." He looked the new man over again as if trying to remember something more to ask him, tell him. "Check," and he left, looking relieved to be leaving and at the same time uneasy about it, a very curious expression.

C-Note left the microphone on the chair and set to work on the units. He had to prepare them and these few minutes would be his only chance. If the pitchman had not volunteered to go to lunch, C-Note would have had to beg off the next demonstration and remain backstage while his boss pitched out front in order to get to them in time. He tightened his gloves and dug his fingertips into the big Ace carton and ripped the cardboard. They did not hurt at all anymore; he was glad of that, in a bitter sort of way.

"…And today only," droned C-Note, "as a special advertising premium from the manufacturer, this pair of stainless steel tongs, guaranteed never to rust, just the thing for picking baby up out of the bathtub…."

He lifted a potato from the cutting board and plunked it ceremoniously into the waste hole. Most of the ladies giggled.

"That's right, they're yours, along with the Everlast glass knife, the Mighty Mite rotary tool, the Lifetime orange juicer *and* the fruit and vegetable appliance complete with five-year written warranty and two interchangeable surgical steel blades, all for the price of the VariVeger alone. *If* you all promise to go home and tell your friends and neighbors about us, extend our word-of-mouth. Because you will not find this wonder product on the shelves of your stores, no ma'am, not yet. When you do, next fall sometime, the new, improved VariVeger alone will list for a price of seven dollars and ninety-five cents. That's seven ninety-five for the shredder, chopper and julienne potato maker alone. You all remember how to operate this little miracle, don't you, so that you'll be able to put it to work on your husband's, your boyfriend's, your next door neighbor's husband's dinner just as soon as you get home tonight?"

More laughter.

"Just crowd in close as you can now, 'cause this is the last time I'm going to be demonstrating this amazing…"

"Say, does that thing really work?"

"Three years of kitchen testing…" C-Note saw that it was the head pitchman, watching from the aisle, a sporting smirk on his lips. "Three years of testing by the largest consumer laboratory…"

There was something else.

Distracted, he let his voice roll off for a brief moment, heard the reverberation replaced by the dull din of milling shoppers, the ringing of cash registers and the sound of a piano playing on the other side of the Special Children's Easter Department. He hesitated, his teeth setting and grinding. Why wouldn't she let him stop? He hovered over the soggy cutting board, waiting for the sharp crack of the ruler on the music rest, just missing his knuckles.

A gnarled hand reached up, grasping for a VariVeger. C-Note snapped to.

"Just another minute, ma'am, and I'll be handing out the good-will samples. If you'll just bear with me, I'm sure you'll go away from this store

feeling…"

And so on and on. He peeled a potato, set it on the grid of the VariVeger and slammed his hand down on the safety guard handle. Dozens of slim, pallid, finger-like segments appeared underneath. A susurrus of delight swept the crowd.

"No need to hold back—the patented safety grip bar makes it for sure you won't be serving up finger stew tonight!"

Then he took up the Mighty Mite, needled it into a radish and rotated the blade, holding to the protective finger guard. And a good thing, too: without that tiny ridge of aluminum the blade would continue turning right down through glove, finger and jointed bone. Five seconds later he pulled the radish apart in an accordion spiral.

"Here's just the thing for that mother-in-law you thought you'd never impress!"

Oohs and ahhs. Nothing worked like a non sequitur.

He diced onions, he ripple-cut potato chips, lateral, diagonal and criss-cross, he sliced blood-red tomatoes into inflationary slips—

"This is one way to stretch that food bill to cover the boss, his wife, your in-laws, your husband and all sixteen screaming kids!"

—he squeezed gouts of juice from a plastic spout like a magician with a never-empty lotta, he slivered green beans and cross-haired a turnip into a stiff blooming white flower. He shredded lettuce head after head, he riced more potatoes, he wavy-edged a starchy-smelling mound of French fries, he chopped cabbage, he separated a cucumber into a fleshy green Mobius strip, he purled twists of lemon peel, he segmented a carrot, grated another, then finished by describing the Everlast glass knife, stacking the packages into a protective wall in front of him. You know. You know what he said. And he gave the signal and the money came forth and he moved forty-three unit combinations at a price less than one-half of the fanciful manufacturer's retail, the bills folded between his fingers like Japanese paper water flowers, blooming and growing in the juices as his gloves became green, green as Christmas trees made of dollars.

He scraped the garbage into a hole, mopped his forehead, put away twenty unsold packages, stripped off his plastic apron, unplugged the mike and departed the platform. Just as he was about to peel the drenched gloves from his hands, the head pitchman appeared at the slit in the curtain.

C-Note left his gloves on.

The pitchman flashed his hand forward, then thought better of it.

"Hell of a salesman," he announced.

"We thank you," said C-Note. "But—"

"Don't let it go to your head, though."

"No, sir. I got—"

"Hell of a salesman. But what the hell was that business with the knife?"

"I sold the knife. 'Long with the rest of the package. Isn't that all right, sir? But if you don't mind, I got to—"

"But you didn't *demonstrate* the knife. What's with that? You afraid you're gonna cut yourself or—"

C-Note's sharp eyes nailed him where he stood.

"If you don't mind, I got to go now." He started for the curtain, head down. "I mean, this gut of mine's startin' to eat itself. If you don't mind. Sir. If you think I earned my lunch."

"Hell yes, you earned it, boy." The pitchman put a foot up on the kitchen chair. His toe brushed the carton, the one with the torn-open top. "Hey, wait a minute."

C-Note drew back the curtain.

"Look, you want your money or don't you?"

C-Note turned back.

"Ha ha." The pitchman unfolded some money. C-Note took it without counting, which made the pitchman stare. "Hell of a salesman," he muttered, smiling crookedly. He watched the heavyset man leave.

"Kid must have to take a hell of a leak," the pitchman said to himself. It was only after he had counted and stacked the limp piles of bills in the money box, counted the units, shaken his head and paced the floor several times, lost in some ambitious vision, that he noticed the torn-top carton. "Hell of a salesman," he said again, shaking his head with pleasure. He poked around inside, counting the reserve. Cutting his finger on something, he drew it back with a grimace and stuck it in his mouth. "Well goddam," he said slowly, patiently, pulling up the crease in his trousers and seating himself before the carton from which, he now realized, unpackaged units had been inexplicably switched, "what in the name of the…" *goddam holy hell do we have here?* he might have said.

C-Note hurried for the back stairs. On the landing he stopped and looked at his hands. They were trembling. Still moist, they resembled thick, mushy clumps of pseudopodia. Loosening the fingers one by one, he eased the gloves off at last.

His fingers quivered, fat and fishbelly-white. The tips were disfigured by a fine, shiny line. They had healed almost perfectly, sewn back right afterwards, in the ambulance; still, the fusion was not quite perfect, the ends angled out each slightly askew from the straight thrust of the digits. No one would notice, probably, unless they studied his hands at close range. But the sight of them bothered him.

He braced himself, his equilibrium returning. He swallowed heavily, his breath steadying, his heart leveling out to a familiar regular tattoo. There was no need to panic. They would not notice anything out of the ordinary, not until later. Tonight, perhaps. At home.

He recognized the feeling now as exhilaration. He felt it every time.

Too many steps to the ground floor. He turned back, stuffing the gloves into his coat pocket, and re-entered the store.

He passed quickly through the boundaries of the Kitchen Appliance Department. Mixers. Teflon ware. Beaters, spoons, ladles, spatulas, hanging like gleaming doctors' tools. If one were to fall it would strike the wood, making him jump, or smack the backs of his hands, again and again. One of them always had, every day. Some days a spoon, other days something else, depending on what she had been cooking. Only one day, that last day, had she been scoring a ham; at least it had smelled like a ham, he remembered, even after so many years. That day it had been a knife.

The Muzak was lilting, a theme from a movie? Plenty of strings to drown out the piano, if there was one. He relaxed.

The women had somnambulated aimlessly from the demonstration platform, their new packages pressed reassuringly to their sides, moving like wheeled scarecrow mannequins about the edges of the Music Department. From here it was impossible to differentiate them from the saleswoman he had met there, by the pianos. She might have been any one of them.

He passed the platform and jumped onto the escalator. The rubber handrail felt cool under his grip. Hastily he pulled a new pair of white gloves from his inside pocket and drew them on.

At the first floor, on his way out to the parking lot, he decided to detour by the
Candy Department.

"May I help you, sir?"

Her hands, full and self-indulgent, smoothed the generous waist of her taut white uniform.

"A pound-and-a-half of the butter toffee nuts, all right, sweets?"

The salesgirl blushed as she funneled the fragrant candy into a paper sack. He saw her name badge: *Margie*. There was nothing about her that was sharp or demanding. She would be easy to please—no song and dance for her. He tipped her seventy-five cents, stroking the quarters into the deep, receptive folds of her soft palm.

He tilted the bag to his mouth and received a jawful of the tasty sugared nuts.

At the glass door he glanced down to see why the bag did not fit all the way into his wide trouser pocket. Then he remembered.

He withdrew one of the parts he had removed backstage and turned it over, fingering it pleasurably as he waddled into the lot. It was a simple item, an aluminum ring snapped over a piece of injection-molded plastic. It glinted in the afternoon sunlight as he examined it. A tiny safety guard, it fit on the vegetable shredder just above the rim that supported the surgical steel blades. A small thing, really. But it was all that would prevent a thin, angular woman's fingers from plunging down along with cucumber or potato or soft, red tomato. Without it, they would be stripped into even, fresh segments, clean and swift, right to the bone. He slipped it back into his pocket, where it dropped into the reservoir of other such parts, some the little safety wheels from the vegetable garnisher, some the protective bars from the Mighty Mite rotary tool. But mostly they were pieces from the VariVeger, that delightful invention, the product of three years of kitchen testing, the razor sharp, never-fail slicer and stripper, known the world over for its swift, unhesitating one-hand operation.

He kept the bag in his hand, feeding from it as he walked on across the parking lot and down the block, losing himself at once in the milling, mindless congestion of Easter and impatient Mother's Day shoppers.

You Can Go Now

1.

The receiver purred in his hand.

He glanced around the bedroom, feeling as if he had just awakened from a long, dreamless sleep.

A click, then recorded music. He had been placed on hold.

There was something he was trying to remember. Everything seemed to be ready, but—"Thank-you-for-waiting-good-afternoon-Pacific-Southwest-Airlines-may-I-help-you?"

He told the voice about his reservation; he was sure he had one. Would she—

Yes. Confirmed.

He thanked her and hung up.

Wait. What was the flight number? He must have written it down—yes. It was probably in his wallet.

He bent over the coat on the bed, feeling for the slim leather billfold. There, in the breast pocket. He fumbled through business cards, odd papers, credit cards.

No.

But no matter. He would find out when he got there. Still, there was *something.*

He pulled out the drawer in the nightstand, under the phone, and started poking around, not even sure of what he was looking for.

He found a long, unmarked envelope, near the bottom. He took it and held it tightly as he slipped the coat on, then put it into the inside pocket while he felt with his other hand for the keys. He patted his outer pockets, but they were not there.

Head down, he left the room.

His bags were stacked neatly by the wall of the foyer, but the keys were not there. He paced through the living room, the kitchen, checking the tables.

He went back to the bedroom, eyes down.

There.

By the door. The key ring was wedged by the bottom edge, between the door and the pile of the carpet, as though it had been flung or kicked there.

He picked it up, walked to the front door, lifted his bags, and went out to the car.

It was still early afternoon, so the freeway would be a clear shot most of the way.

He switched off the air conditioning—who had left it on?—and rolled down the window, stretching out. The seat was adjusted wrong again, damn it, so he had to grope for the lever and push with his feet, struggling to seat the runner back another notch.

He connected through to the San Diego Freeway, made the turn and tried to unwind the rest of the way. He sampled the radio, but it was only more of the same: back scratchings about love or the lack of it and the pleasure or the pain it brought or might bring; maybe, could be, possibly, for sure, always, never, too soon, not soon enough, in the wrong rain or the wrong style. *Wrong, wrong.* He flicked it off.

The airport turnoff would be coming up.

He flexed his arm, checking his watch. But it had stopped. The face was spattered with dry, flaking paint, so it would have been hard to read the numbers, anyway.

He toed the accelerator until he was moving five miles over the speed limit, then ten.

He was glad to have made such good time; a few extra minutes would mean a drink first, maybe two—

It was funny. The car ahead, at the foot of the ramp. The hack-up lights were on, but not the brake lights. He did not slow, because it meant that the signal at the intersection would he—

Headlights. They were headlights.

Headed directly at him.

You can go now, said a voice.

He leaned on the horn, but then there was the heavy, bonesnapping impact and everything was driven into him with such force that the horn stayed on, bleating like a siren, whether or not he would have wanted it to or would even have thought of it or of anything, of anything else at all.

2.

He was late getting to LAX, so he swung at once into the western parking lot, hoofed it over to the PSA building and sloughed his bags through the metal detector without stopping at the flight information desk. A couple of quick questions later, a hostess in a Halloween-colored uniform was pointing him toward the boarding tunnel, and then another was ushering him onto the plane and back to the smoking section.

He stashed his bags and found himself in a seat on the aisle, next to a pregnant woman and two drugged-looking hyperactive children. They continued to squirm, but slowly, as though underwater, as he tugged at the seat belt, trying to dislodge the oversized buckle from beneath his buttocks.

A double vodka and two cigarettes later, he was halfway to Oakland and swinging inland away from the silvery tilt of the sea. He drained the ice against his teeth and snared the elbow of a stewardess.

Another?

Well, the bottles were all put away, but—yes. Of course.

Of course.

The smaller child was busy on the floor in front of the seat, trying to tear out the pages of a washable cloth picture book about animals who wore gloves and had one-syllable names. The child had already stripped the airline coloring book, the oxygen mask instruction card and the air sickness bag into piles of ragged chits. Now, however, he dropped his work and wobbled to his feet, straining to clamber up the seat and under his mother's smock.

But the mother was absorbed in the counting and recounting of empty punch cups — one, two, three, see? one, two three — over and over, for the older child, who was working with all his might to slide out from under his seat belt. He would flatten like a limbo dancer until his shoes touched the floor and his knees buckled; then the mother would reach down, hoist him back up and begin counting the cups for him again.

"One, two, three, see? Why don't you try, Joshua?"

Ignored, the smaller child twisted like a bendable rubber doll and, sucking the ink off two fingers, watched the man across from him.

Who looked away. He was, mercifully, beginning to feel something from the double: a familiar ease, faint but unmistakable. He folded his hands, cold against each other, and tried to unwind while there was still time. He caught a glimpse out the window of farmlands sectioned like the layers of a surgical operation, beyond the flashing tip of the wing.

The child followed his eyes. "Break-ing," the child announced.

Idly he watched the wing swaying slowly as it knifed through the air currents. He remembered seeing the wing moving up and down like that on his first flight, how he worried that it might break off until someone had explained to him about expansion and contraction and allowances for stress.

"What's breaking?" said the mother. "Nothing's breaking, Jeremiah. Look, look what Mommy's…"

The stewardess reappeared. She rattled the plastic serving tray, bending over his lap with the drink.

He reached into his back pocket for his wallet.

"Want more punch!" said the older child.

"More punch?" asked the stewardess.

The wallet wasn't there. He remembered. He reached inside his coat.

He felt a long envelope, and the billfold. He removed both, peeled off two bills and laid them on the tray.

"Break-ing!" said the smaller child.

At that moment a shadow passed over the tray and the stewardess's wet fingers. He glanced up.

Outside, heavy strands of mist had begun to drift above the wings, temporarily blocking the sun. Looking down, he saw the black outline of the plane passing over the manicured rectangles of land.

Suddenly, sharply, the plane dropped like an elevator falling between floors. Then just as suddenly it stopped.

"Looks like we might be hitting some turbulence," he said. "Sure you've got a pilot up there?"

His attention returned to the window. Now darker clouds clotted the view, turning the window opaque so that he saw a reflection of his own face within the thick glass.

He heard a voice say something he did not understand.

"What?" he said.

"I said, that's funny," said the stewardess, "like an open grave."

A flash of brilliant light struck outside, penetrating the cloud bank. She stopped pouring the drink. He looked up at her, then at the tray. He noticed that her hands were shaking.

Then a dull, muffled sound from the back of the plane. Then a series of jolts that rattled the bottle against the lip of the glass. He thought he heard a

distant crackling, like ants crawling over aluminum foil. Then the quick, shocking smell of smoke wafted up the aisle.

"Oh my God," whispered the stewardess hoarsely, "we've been—"

"I know," he said, strangely calm, "I know," *with tears of blood I tell you I know.*

The tray, ice and drink went flying, and then they were falling, everything falling inward and children, pillows, oxygen masks, bottles, the envelope he still clutched stupidly in his hand, the whole thing, the plane and the entire world were falling, falling and would not, could not be stopped.

3.

It was dusk as he drove into the delta, and the river, washed over with the memory of the dying red eye of the sun, seemed to be reflecting a gradual darkening of the world.

He wound down the windows of the rented car, cranking back the wind wings so that he could feel the air. The smell of seed crops and the rich, silted undergrowth of the banks blew around him, bathing him in the special dark parturience of the Sacramento Valley.

He had been away too long.

And soon he would be back, away for a time from the practices of the city, which he had come to think of more and more lately as the art of doing natural things in an unnatural way—something he was afraid he had learned all too well. But now, very soon, he would be back on the houseboat; for a while, at least.

He did not know how long.

He would anchor somewhere near The Meadows. He would tie up to that same tree in the deep, still water, near the striped bass hole, hearing the lowing of cattle from behind the clutch of wild blackberry bushes on shore….

And this time, he dared himself, he might not go back at all. Not, at least, for a long, long time.

He drove past the weathered, century-old mansions left from the gold days, past the dirt roads marked only by rural mailboxes, past the fanning

rows of shadowy, pungent trees, past the collapsing wooden walkways of the abandoned settlement towns, past the broad landmark barn and the whitewash message fading on its doors, one he had never understood:

HIARA PERU RESH.

He geared down and took the last, unpaved mile in a growing rush of anticipation. Rocks and eucalyptus pods rained up under the car, the wheel jerking in his hands, the shocks and the leaf springs groaning and creaking.

Then he saw a curl of smoke beyond the next grove and caught the warm smell of catfish frying over open coals. And he knew, at last, that he was nearing the inlet, the diner and the dock.

He braked in the gravel and walked down the path to the riverbank. He heard the lapping of the tide and the low, heavy knocking of hulls against splintered pilings. Finally he saw the long pier, the planks glistening, the light and dark prows of cabin cruisers rocking in their berths, the dinghies tied up to battered cleats, their slack, frayed ropes swollen where they dipped into the water, the buoys bobbing slowly, the running lights of a smaller, rented houseboat chugging away around the bend, toward Wimpy's Landing.

The boards moved underfoot as he counted the steps, head down, and he smiled, reminding himself that it would take a few hours to regain his sea legs. He reached the spot, a few yards from the end of the docking area, where he knew the *Shelley Ann* would be waiting.

He tried to remember how long it had been. Since the spring. Yes, that was right, Memorial Day weekend. Sometimes friends rode him about paying for the year-round space—why, when he used her only a few times each year? Even Shelley had begun talking that way in the last few weeks. *Cut your losses on that albatross!* She had actually said that. But at times like this, coming to her after so many months, he forgot it all. It felt like coming home. It always did.

He looked up.

The space was empty.

His eyes darted around the landing, but she was nowhere that he could see.

Unless—of course. She had been moved. That was it. But why? His boat had never been assigned any other stall for as long as he had owned her.

Something happened, then. But there had been no long distance call, no word in the mail; Old John would not be one to hide anything as serious as an accident. Would he?

He took a few steps, his hands in his back pockets, scanning the river in both directions.

He could just make out the diner/office/tackle shop through the trees. A dim light was burning behind the peeling wooden panes.

Yes. Old John would know. Old John would be able to tell him the story, whatever it was.

Which was the trouble. Knowing him, it would take an hour, two. A beer, three beers, maybe even dinner. The lonely old man would not let him go with a simple explanation, of that he was sure.

And now he found he could think only of the *Shelley Ann.* He had waited and he had planned and he had come all this way, and at the moment nothing else seemed to matter. He needed to feel her swaying under him, rocking him. Now, right now.

Then. Everything. Would be. All right.

He stepped off the end to the bank, peering under the covered section of the landing, even though he knew that his boat would have been too large to clear the drooping canvas overhang.

He crouched at the edge, feeling suddenly very alone. The river smelled like dead stars. He watched the water purl gently around the floats and echo back and forth over the fine sand. A few small bubbles rode the surface, and a thin patina of oil shone with mirror-like luminescence under the dimming sky, reflecting a dark, swirling rainbow.

No stars were visible yet. In fact, the sky above the trees grew more steely as he watched.

He looked again at the water. He fingered a chip of gravel and tossed it. It made a plunking sound and settled quickly, and as it disappeared he found that he was straining to follow it with his eyes all the way down to the bottom.

He reached into his coat for a cigarette. His hands were still cold, and growing colder.

He felt the cigarette case and drew it out, along with something else.

He pushed a cigarette into his lips and stared at the envelope. It had no name and address on it. He couldn't remember—

He opened it, slipped out a neatly folded sheet of bond paper, unfolded it.

The leaves of the trees near him rustled, and then a light breeze strafed the water, tipping it with silver.

Still crouching, he fired up the lighter, lit the cigarette and squinted, trying to make out the words. It was written in careful longhand, a letter or —no. Something else.

He read the title.

The paper began to make a tapping sound. He held out his hand. Rain had started to fall, a light rain that danced on the river and left it glittering. As he blinked down at the paper, more drops hit the page. The ink began to run, blurring before his eyes.

The lighter became too hot to hold. He snapped it shut and stood. He heard the rain talking in the trees, on the canvas tarpaulin, on the struts of the rotting pier.

His legs were cramped. He made a staggering step forward. His shoes sloshed the water. He stepped still further, led by the swinging arc of his cigarette tip in the darkness, until the rain found the cigarette and extinguished it.

He dropped it and moved forward, ankle-deep in the river. Is she really there? he thought.

Then he waded out into the low tide, the rain striking around him with a sound like musical notes, the melting paper still gripped in his hand, trailing the water.

4.

Dazed, he glanced around the bedroom.

The receiver was in his hand. By now the plastic had become quite warm against his palm. He stared at it for a moment, then returned it to his ear.

He heard recorded music.

Click.

"Thank-you-for-waiting-good-afternoon-Pacific-SouthwestAirlines-may-I-help-you?"

There was something he wanted to tell her. He had been trying hard to remember, but —

His eyes continued to roam the lower half of the room. Then he spotted the keys, the car keys, wedged between the bottom edge of the door and the pile of the carpet, as though they had been flung or kicked there with great force.

It started to come back to him. Shelley had done it. She had thrown the key ring with all her strength, a while ago. Yes. That had happened.

He raised his head at last, rubbed his neck.

And saw her, there on the other side of the bed.

She lay with eyes closed, hands at her sides, fingers clutching the bedspread.

He didn't want to disturb her. He modulated his voice, cupping the mouthpiece with his hand.

He told the maddeningly cheerful voice on the phone—it reminded him of a Nichiren Shoshu recruiter who had buttonholed him on the street once — to cancel one reservation. His wife was not ready, would not be ready on time.

Yes. Only one. That's right. Thank you.

He hung up.

He lifted the phone and replaced it on the nightstand.

On the bed, where the phone had been, was an envelope.

He picked it up.

It was empty.

There was a sheet of paper on the floor, where Shelley had crumpled and thrown it. That was right, wasn't it?

He smoothed it out on his knee.

It was written in a very careful, painstaking longhand, much more legible than his own. He started to read it.

At the end of the first stanza he paused.

Yes, it was something Shelley had found—no, she had had it all along, saved (hidden?) in her drawer in the nightstand. She had taken it out earlier this morning, or perhaps it had been last night, and had shown it to him, and one of them had become angry and crumpled it onto the floor. That was how it had started.

He read it again, this time to the end.

(1)
brown hair

curling smile
shadowed eyes
the line of your lips…
hair tangled
over me

(2)
warm skin
tender breasts
your mouth and
sweet throat…
hair moist
under me

(3)
there will be more
my eyes tell your eyes
than love of touch
face lost in my face…
do you know what lives
between our breathing palms?

(4)
twisted hair
seashell ear
soft sounds
stopped by my chest…
dark eyes sleep
while I speak to your heart

He turned to his wife.

It was true; she was beautiful. Whoever had written those words had loved her. He studied her intently until he began to feel an odd sense of dislocation, as if he were seeing her for the first time.

He looked again at the paper.

At the bottom of the page, following the last stanza, there was a name.

It was his own.

And in the corner, a date: almost fifteen years ago.

Quietly, almost imperceptibly, he began to cry.

For so much had changed over the years, much more than handwriting. He did not love her now, not in any traditional sense; instead, he thought, there was merely a sense of loving that seemed to exist somewhere between her and his mind.

As he sat there, he forced his eyes to trace the lines of her body, her face: the shrug of her shoulders, the sweep of her long, slender neck, the surprisingly full jaw and yet the almost weak point of the chin, the slight lips, the sad curve at the corners of her mouth, the smooth, even shade of her skin, the narrow nose, the nearly parallel lines that formed the sides of her small face, the close-set eyes, the thin and almond-shaped lids and delicately sketched lashes, the worried cast of her forehead and the baby-fine wisps at the hairline, the soft down that grew near her temples, the fuller curls that filled out a nimbus around her head, the hair bunched behind her neck, the ends hard and stiff now where the dried brown web had trickled out, just a spot at first but soon spreading onto the pillow after he had lain her down so gently. He had not meant it. He had not meant anything like it. He did not even remember what he had meant, and that was the truth. He had tried to tell her that, practically at the moment it had happened, but then it was too late. And it was too late now. It would always be too late.

He lowered his head.

When he opened his eyes again, he was looking at the paper. At the top of the page, perfectly centered, was the title. It said:

YOU CAN GO NOW.

Today's Special

"How about some nice bottom round steak?" asked Avratin the butcher. "Is today's special."

"No round steak."

"Ah. Well, Mrs. Teola—"

"Taylor."

"—Mrs. Taylor." Avratin the butcher tapped the trays behind the open glass, then thumbed back another display of cuts. "I got some nice, nice clods, can cut for Swiss steak if—"

"No Swiss steak."

Avratin started to sigh, pinched off his nose with his thick curving forefinger, which was getting cold. "Excuse me. I know what you want. For you, some nice, nice, very nice pot—"

"No pot roast, neither."

His hands began describing in the air. "Some lovely chuck, some darling rump, a little—" He squeezed the air. "—Tender, juicy flank steak, eh?" He saw her turn away, the gray bun at the back of her neck beginning to wag. "Some brisket for boiling!" He heard his wife's heavy heels in the sawdust and at that slapped his forehead with both hands—*I give up*— for her to see.

"My, you're looking very well today," Avratin's wife cooed.

Muttering, Avratin slid the last tray back in place, grumbling to himself, sifting the red chunks of beef tenderloin through his fingers, which were now quite cold; the meat plopped back onto the paper liner and he slammed the glass, knocking the parsley loose from the top of the ground round.

"Yeah, you should hope you don't see my sister, Rose."

"Oh, Ro-sie. And how is her operation?"

"Don't ask."

"Well, Mrs. Teo—"

"Taylor. Taylor! My husband puts Teola in the book, nobody calls him." The gray bun wagged in growing impatience. "But now he's Manny Taylor. Manny Taylor! I want you tell me, would you call from the yellow pages a man with the name Manny Taylor?"

"Well," began Avratin's wife, standing closer to her husband, "what's good for your mister's business—"

"We should all live so long, I promise you. My God, my God." She shook her bun and hunched toward the door.

Avratin's wife cleared her throat. "Today special, we have some very nice fish, Mrs. Taylor," she called sweetly and waited for the woman to turn back under the creaking overhead fan.

"You got nothing I want," said the woman finally, only half-turning, shifting her brown carry-all to her other hand.

"Why, Mrs. Taylor," sang Avratin's wife. "You've been our faithful customer for thirteen years. Those years, they mean only that you should come to this? You're taking your business elsewhere now? God forbid that Lou and I should forget *our* friends so easy."

"You should talk, dearies. *You* should *talk!*" This she said directly to Avratin, sizing him up in his white apron as if he were an imposter. "You get Luttfisk back, then maybe we talk meat. That Luttfisk, he *knows* meat!" And she shuffled out the door.

A moment later, to no one in particular, to the passing cars, to the old man at the curb with the white beard and the stiff black hat, Avratin's wife called, "My Lou, he was owning this shop before that Luttfisk was starting in the business! Don't you forget that!"

But Avratin was shaking his head, reaching around to untie the strings, throwing his apron on the hook.

"Louie?"

He headed across the empty store to the back.

"Ask me why I'm closing an hour early. But ask me! Go ahead! You ask me about business, and I'll tell you. Business…is…lousy!"

Avratin's wife threw up her hands, imploring the ceiling fan to do something, anything.

In the tiny bedroom, by a single small lamp with the crisp, yellowed cellophane still clinging to the shade, with the sound turned down on the Johnny Carson Show, Avratin and his wife were having an argument.

"…Twenty years in the retail meat business and you knife me in the back. Twenty years putting bread on your plate, only to have you—"

"Listen to this! He's too proud, too proud to admit a mistake…."

"—Twist, twisting the knife!"

Reproach, recrimination, guilt, counter-accusation, self-deprecation. The old pattern. And only to come to this: that at the end, the finish, before grumbling into bed, during the sermonette, Avratin raised his hurt face to

the water-stained ceiling one last time to declare, before the gods and whatever other audience might be listening:

"All right, I take care of it, I take care of everything. No matter that Luttfisk tries to rob me, his own partner. I get a man can take care of the job. I promise you, the problem be fixed, once-for-all!"

At the Century-Cudahy Storage and Packing Co., the White Collar Butcher was a very important man. No one at the plant could say exactly why, though it had to do with the fact that he was the best butcher in the county, that he had the finest set of tools anyone had ever laid eyes on, and the obvious quiet pride he took in his work. It had to do with the way he picked his own shifts, coming in unpredictably and always with the attitude of a man who has already been at work for several hours. It had to do with the air of authority he carried with him into the walk-in, the indefinable look of knowing something that he would never tell on his thin, expressionless lips, his smooth, ageless face, his small steel-blue eyes that were perpetually set on a place somewhere beyond the carcasses and the warehouse.

Alone at night, the White Collar Butcher stood motionless before the freezer, his eyes on the temperature gauge. But they were not focused there. Then, slowly, surely, he turned his back on the hook beam scales and stood over his meat block. He moved his hand from the evenly beveled edges to the guard at the right of the block. His hand was heavy, a special tool itself, quite perfectly balanced, smooth and pink and tapered ideally to the handles which he now allowed his fingers to play over lightly: the meat saw, the cleaver, the steak knife, the boning knife, below them the small scale, the aluminum trays, the spool of twine and, to the left, the blackboard. Then, with smooth, automatic, practiced moves he took down his tools one by one and washed them, wiped them and rubbed the handles, proceeded to sharpen them on the slow grinding wheel and then the whetstone, touched up the edges with the steel and wrapped them individually in soft, protective leather.

He set the pouches out neatly and then, by reflex acquired through years of practice, slipped his hand into his trouser pocket and withdrew a folded square of white paper. With one hand he opened it and read the name and

address printed there with a grease pencil in straight block letters. *The name and address.*

He refolded it and slid it back into his pocket under the apron.

Another job.

Then, positioning in an easy, familiar stance, he reached for the wire brush and steel scraper and box of salt and began cleaning his cutting block, employing short, sure motions with his strong arms and shoulders, conserving his energy for the job to come. And as he worked on into the night, his tanned face and immaculately styled hair set off tastefully above the high, fashionable collar and wide hand-sewn tie that lay smoothly against his tailored shirt of imported silk, the whole effect suggesting a means far beyond his butcher's salary, was that perhaps the beginning of a narrow, bloodless smile that pinched the corners of his thin, efficient, professional lips?

For five nights Avratin hammered his pillow and spent more time than he should have in the cramped bathroom. Then the good news arrived.

Up went the noisy butcher paper painted with the proclamation he had kept rolled and hidden for three days now. He was nervous with anticipation as he tore off strips of masking tape and slapped it up across the plate glass windows. It covered the whole front of the store, right over the futile daily specials from the week past, as well it should have.

The first customers of the day were already waiting at the door when Avratin's wife finished dressing and joined her husband.

She stopped in the middle of the fresh sawdust floor, looking about as if by some transmogrification of sleep she had just walked into a strange, new life, or at least someone else's store. She smoothed her hair and gaped, turning around and around.

"This is a holiday? Or I'm sleeping still. Pinch me, Lou."

Avratin had pulled out all the trays in the meat case and was busy arranging his new, large display.

"Take it easy, take it easy, Rachel. You got your wish."

The last parking space in front filled up, and at last Avratin stood and leaned back and watched the women milling around on the sidewalk, pointing excitedly to the sign. He smiled a special smile that he had not used in years.

"Lou! Lou! Lou! You didn't do nothing too drastic, did you?" Then what he had said seemed to hit her.

She clipped to the door, shook the knob, apologized to the woman with the gray bun who was first in line, hurried back to get the keys, almost ran to the door and opened it.

Avratin watched her outside, shading her eyes, holding off their questions until she could get a good look at it herself.

She stood with one hand on her hip, one hand above her eyes, reading and rereading the banner with disbelief.

The women scrambled inside, heading for the meat case. He leaned back on his hands, watching them over the scales, a bright morning chill of anticipation tingling in his blood.

They stopped in front of the case, staring for long seconds.

Avratin wanted to speak to them, but held himself in check a moment longer.

His wife was the last to enter the store. She pushed her way through the inert bodies, ignoring the still, dulled faces on a few of which was beginning to dawn the first dim, uncomprehending light of recognition.

"Lou, I saw the sign," she beamed. "Is it true? Is it? Where is he?"

Avratin leaned forward. He spread his arms behind the transparent case in a gesture of supplication, palms out. His eyes rolled up to the creaking, slowly revolving fan and then returned to the display, newly arrived from the man in the high white collar, which he had just now finished arranging so carefully under the glass, the whole length of the counter, to the new cuts, strange cuts, so invitingly laid out, preserved by the cold, here something red, there something brown and almost recognizable, there a fine shank, there an opened ribcage, there a portion of a face you knew so well you almost expected it to greet you.

"Here," Avratin answered, in a voice he had not used in years. "Here! Can't you read the sign?

"LUTTFISK IS BACK!"

Very shortly thereafter the short, muffled cries began.

Call Home

When he walked in, the red light on the answering machine was blinking.

He dropped the mail on the coffee table and sat down. He ran a hand through his hair and leaned into the sofa, his ears still ringing from the rush-hour traffic.

He was in no hurry to replay his messages. It was easy to guess what they wanted: time, money, answers. He had none to spare. He reached out and stirred the pile of letters.

More of the same.

He got up, went to the bedroom and changed his clothes. Then he came back and sank deeper into the cushions. He propped his feet up and closed his eyes.

When the phone rang again, he let the machine take over.

"I'm not home right now," he heard his own recorded voice say, *"but if you care to leave a message, please begin speaking when you hear the tone. Thank you for calling…."*

Beep.

A pause, and the incoming tape started rolling.

He waited to monitor the call.

Static. A rush of white noise. Like traffic.

No one there. Or someone who did not like talking to a machine.

A few more seconds and it would hang up automatically.

"Daddy? Is th-that you?"

He opened his eyes.

"Please c-can you come get me? I don't know how to get home…and I'm scared!"

What?

"It's getting cold…and dark…"

He sat forward.

"There's a man here…and he's bothering me! I think he's crazy! And it's going to rain and…and…Daddy, tell me what to do!"

He got to his feet.

"I don't like this place! There's a rooster…it's burning…and a gas station…and a sign. It says, um, it starts with a p. P-I-C-O…"

He crossed the living room.

"Daddy, please come quick…!"

He snatched up the receiver.

"Hello?" he said.

The child's voice began to sing brokenly.

"Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home…your house is on fire…and your children will burn…."

Her voice trailed off as she started to cry.

"Hello? Hello?"

Click.

He stood there holding the phone, wondering what to do.

He was sure of only one thing.

He had no daughter.

So what if it was a wrong number? She was in trouble. A child, a little girl. What if something happened to her?

He couldn't let it go.

She had spelled out a word. P-I-C-O. The sign. A rooster, a gas station… yes, it sounded familiar.

The chicken restaurant. Next to the 76 station. On Pico Boulevard.

It wasn't far.

The traffic was still gridlocked. He crossed Wilshire in low gear, then Santa Monica, and turned west. A stream of cars growled past him, ragged music and demanding voices leaking from beneath shimmering hoods. He made a left on Westwood and kept to the right as he passed Olympic, slowing to a crawl as he came to the next corner.

She was huddled in the doorway of El Pollo Muerto, a school book bag at her feet. Her legs were dirty and her hair was in her eyes. A few yards away, at the gas station, was the phone booth. She did not look up as he braked by a loading zone.

He leaned over and rolled down the window.

"Hey!"

The people at the bus stop glanced his way blankly, then stared past him down the street.

She lowered her head, resting her forehead on her arms.

He cleared his throat and shouted above the din. "Hey, little girl!"

She raised her head.

A woman eyed him suspiciously.

"Hi!" he called. "Hello, there! Do you need any help?"

The woman glared at him.

He ignored her and spoke to the girl.

"Are you the one who—?" Suddenly he felt foolish. "Did you call me?"

The little girl's face brightened.

"Daddy?"

The crowd moved closer. Then there was a rumbling and a pumping of brakes. He saw in his rearview mirror that an RTD bus had pulled up behind him.

"Come on," he said. "And your books — "

He opened the door for her as the bus sounded its horn.

"Daddy, it *is* you!"

The crowd surged past. The woman took notice of his license plate. The bus tapped his bumper.

"Get in."

He slipped into gear and got away from the curb. The pressure of traffic carried him across the intersection.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked. He passed another corner before it was possible to turn. "What's the address?"

"I don't know," said the little girl.

"You don't remember?"

She did not answer.

"Well, you'll have to tell me. Which way?"

"Want to go home," she said. She was now sitting straight in her seat, watching the lights with wide eyes.

"Are you all right?"

"I guess so."

At least it hasn't started to rain, he thought. "Did anyone hurt you?"

"I'm kind of hungry," she said.

He idled at a red light and got a good look at her. Seven, maybe eight years old and skinny as a rail. The bones in her wrists showed like white knuckles through the thin skin.

"When was the last time you had anything to eat?"

"I don't know."

She crossed her legs, angling a bruised ankle on a knobby knee, and he saw that her legs were streaked and smudged all the way up. My God, he

thought, how long since she's had a bath? Had she been living on the streets?

"Well then," he said, "the first thing we'll do is get you some food." And then he would figure out what to do with her. "Okay?"

He took her to a deli. She gulped down a hot dog, leaving the bun on the plate, and watched him as he chewed his sandwich. He started to order her another, and realized something. He touched his hip pocket. Empty. He had forgotten his wallet when he changed his clothes.

"Take half of mine," he told her, trying to think.

"I don't like that kind."

She continued to watch him.

Finally he said, "Do you want another hot dog?"

"Yes, please!"

He ordered one more and saw to it that she drank her milk. Afterward, while the waitress was in another part of the restaurant, he said abruptly, "Let's go."

They drove away as the waitress came out onto the sidewalk.

"That was good," said the little girl.

"Glad you liked it. Now — "

"The way you did that. You didn't even leave a tip. You did it for me, didn't you?"

"Yes." What was I supposed to do? he thought. I'll come back tomorrow and take care of it. "Now where are we going?"

"Home," she said. "Oh, Daddy, you're so silly! Where did you think?"

"You've got to tell me," he said in the driveway.

"Tell you what?"

She got out and skipped to the front door, dragging her book bag. She waited for him on the porch.

He shook his head.

"Well," he said once they were inside, "are you going to tell me?"

"Um, where's the bathroom?"

"In there." He went to the phone. "But first — "

He heard water running.

He stood outside the bathroom door and listened. The shower was hissing, and presently she began to sing a song.

In the living room, the phone rang.

"I'm not home right now — "

"Jack, would you pick up, please? I know you're there…"

"Hello, Chrissie. Sorry, I just got in."

"So late? Poor baby…"

"Listen, Chrissie, can I call you back? There's something I have to — "

"Are Ruth and Will there yet?"

"What?"

"Don't tell me you forgot! Well, I guess I can pick up something on the way over. You know, maybe we can get rid of them early. Would you like that?"

"Yeah, sure. But — "

"See you in a few minutes, love. And Jack? I've missed you…"

Click.

"Daddy," called the little girl, "can you come here?"

He entered the darkened bedroom.

The bathroom door was open and steaming. She wrapped herself in a big towel and jumped up on the bed. She opened the towel.

"Dry me?"

"Listen," he said, "who told you to do this? I don't think it's such a good idea to — "

"'S okay. I can do it myself." She made a few swipes with the towel and dropped it on the bed. Even in the faint light he could see how pink, how clean she was. And how small, and how vulnerable. She lay down and wriggled under the sheet.

"Sleepy," she said.

He sat next to her, on the edge of the mattress.

"Kiss me good-night," she said. Her pale arms stretched out. He started to push her away, but she clung to him with all her might. He felt her tears as sobs wracked her body.

"There," he told her, patting her between sharp shoulder blades. "Shh, now…"

"Don't go," she said.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

He lay down next to her till her breathing became slow and regular. After a while he covered her with the blanket, and planted a kiss on her cool forehead before he left the room.

Ruth and Will parked behind Chrissie. He watched from the porch as they helped her carry the take-out food into the house.

He cleared his throat. "There's something I have to tell you."

"We already know," said Ruth.

"How?"

"They didn't hear it from me, I swear," said Chrissie.

"A little bird told me," Ruth said. "And all I can say is, it's about time."

Will plopped down on the sofa. "Well, I think it's great. No point in paying rent on two places."

"*This* place sure isn't big enough," said Ruth. She stopped on the way to the kitchen and scanned the dining room. "Even if you got rid of these bookcases, it wouldn't work. You need more space."

"You know, Jack," said Will, "I have a friend in the real estate business. If you need any advice. Where's the Scotch?"

"Hold on…"

Chrissie winked at him as she passed. "They want to know if we've set the date. What do you think? Should we tell them everything?"

"Yes," he said.

"Wait a minute," said Will, rising and navigating for the bedroom door. "I want to hear this."

His stomach clenched. "Where are you going?"

Will grinned. "To take a leak. That all right with you?"

"Uh, would you mind using the other bathroom? This one's — stopped up."

Chrissie said, "It is? You didn't tell me that."

"I was going to. I was going to tell you all."

"Tell us what?" asked Ruth, coming out of the kitchen. They looked at him expectantly. There was a long pause. His hands were shaking.

"I don't know where to start," he said. He tried a laugh but it came out wrong.

"Take your time," said Ruth. "We've got all evening."

Chrissie squeezed his arm. "Who needs a drink?" she said.

"Yes," he said. "Maybe we could have a drink first."

"What's this?" said Chrissie. She kicked the book bag on the floor, where the little girl had left it.

"Nothing," he said. "Here. Let me give you a hand."

He walked her to the kitchen.

"I can explain," he said.

"Explain what? You look tired, Jack. Was it an awful week?"

He took a deep breath. "Just this. I know it sounds crazy, but — "

On his way out of the small bathroom, Will stuck his head in the kitchen.

"Am I interrupting anything?"

"Of course not," said Chrissie.

"If this is a bad night for you two — "

There was a piercing scream from another part of the house.

He knew what it was before he got there.

The little girl was in the bedroom doorway, rubbing her eyes. She had on one of his shirts.

"Daddy?"

Ruth and Will looked at her. So did Chrissie. Then they looked at him.

"Oh, Daddy, there you are! I had a nightmare. There were people. Are they going now?"

"Daddy?" Chrissie stared at him as though she had never seen him before.

He focused on the little girl as his stomach clenched tighter.

"Tell them," he said.

"What?"

"Everything."

"I don't know what you mean, Daddy."

"All right," he said, "that's it. You're leaving — right now. I'll tell them the whole story myself. Come on. Let's go."

"No! I'll tell. How you picked me up at the bus stop and got me in the car in front of all those people? Or how you cheated and stole for me? Or the part where you gave me a bath and dried me and kissed me and we took a nap together?"

"I think we'd better be leaving," Ruth said.

"Yes," said Chrissie. "That might be a good idea. A very, very good idea."

"Wait." He followed her out. "Chris, I — "

"Don't," she said. "I have to think. And don't call me."

He watched numbly as the cars drove off. It started to rain softly, a misting drizzle in the trees above the mercury-vapor lamps. He watched until their red taillights turned the corner, like the reflection of a fire passing and moving on, leaving the street darker than ever.

"No," he said, hunching his shoulders. "No. No. No…"

He went back into the house.

"Where are you?" he shouted.

She was in the kitchen, helping herself to the food.

"Hi, Daddy," she said. "You got dinner for us. Just you and me. Thank you!"

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

He shook her violently.

"Daddy, you're hurting me!"

"I'm not your daddy and you know it, you little wretch."

"You're scaring me!"

"Don't bother to turn on the tears this time," he said. "It won't work."

She broke free and ran.

He braced himself against the table to stop shaking while he reached for the bottle of Scotch and poured a double shot.

Then he walked slowly, deliberately to the living room.

"Out," he said. "I don't care if it's raining. You've done enough. Get your things and — "

She had the phone in her hand.

"Daddy?" she said into the mouthpiece. "C-can you come and get me? I don't know how to get home…and I'm scared!"

He tried to take the phone away, but she dodged him and kept on talking.

"It's cold…and dark…and there's a man here…I think he's crazy! Daddy, tell me what to do! I don't like this place!"

She gave a description of his street.

"Daddy, please come quick!"

Then she began to sing sweetly, a high, plaintive keening like the wind outside, and the rain that blew with it, settling so coldly over the house.

"Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home…your house is on fire…and your children will burn…."

Her voice trailed off as she started to cry.

She hung up. She stopped crying. Then she went about her business, collecting her clothing and her book bag as though he no longer existed.

He stood there, wondering what it was that was supposed to happen next.

The Machine Demands a Sacrifice

Soot fell in a continuous haze that obliterated the sun over the freeway, leaving a gritty texture on the once-bright finishes of the variegated cars and trucks. For miles ahead they extended bumper to bumper in a snaking line, stretching on through infinite gradations of opaque smog, and if you let your arm hang down from the window and brushed the door with your fingertips, they would come away grainy and black-edged and imprinted with hundreds of microscopic lacerations.

It was five o'clock in Los Angeles on a July afternoon.

A short black van with the words E•MER•GEN•Z•INC stenciled on the sides was stalled in the far right lane.

"Jeezus," said the driver, wiping the sweat out of his eyes with a dirty sleeve. His face was bloated like a brown paper bag full of potatoes, his black eyes peering out through two torn, badly placed holes. "It's that fuel pump again—you know that, don't you?" He shook his head and glared outside for confirmation.

"I thought the Company was supposed to put in a rebuilt one, after last time," said the other, a slight young man named Jaime who was new on the job, with exaggerated disgust. This was in fact only the end of his first work week, and he still looked to the fat man for direction, trying to limit his end of the conversation to a general swearing, bitching echo.

"Jeezus H. Christ," said the fat man, hunching over the wheel and shifting his huge buttocks.

A horn started up behind them.

The fat man shook his head at the floorboard. "I *am* the Company, me and Raoul. *Told* that son of a bitch—but no, he's worried we'll miss some nice, juicy accident if I put 'er in the shop till noon. Man, I tell you…"

"Yeah," said Jaime. "Well, hell, I'll get out and push the son of a bitch. There's a crashpad right up ahead. Thank God at least for that."

He climbed down from his side and went around to the back. The driver got out and pushed at the door, straining to reach the wheel inside. There was a wide shoulder by the side of the freeway, only yards ahead. After a few nauseous grunts through carbon monoxide and bleating horns, the driver hoisted himself in and braked as the van rolled to a stop in front of the compactor.

"Far enough," he gasped, stumbling out. "Don't want to junk this baby yet. God *damn.* Get too close and the junker takes over."

Jaime stood around trying to look grim, kicking rocks off the blacktop.

"Now we just got to wait for it to cool. How much credit we got on the card register, kid?"

"Uh, the starting fund from this morning, plus that two-car we found. The digits we sold 'em. Not much."

"Great. All we need's a COPter to spot us right now." The fat man leaned on the magnetic grapple of the compactor and let a sigh whistle out through his small mouth. "The junk fee on the van would just about pay the breakdown fine," he laughed bitterly. "They got it figured so it comes out *exactly* even, that's what I think."

"Yeah. Except for the vacutract unit," said Jaime. "Right, Jesse?"

But the fat man was looking back over his shoulder, past the massive compactor.

He stuck a thick finger to his lips. He motioned to the kid, a rat-shrewd light coming into his eyes.

Jaime walked over, keeping behind the line of the automatic junking machine. He bobbed his head around the crane where Jesse indicated and saw it.

An '89 sedan with a selenium top was racked up at close to a 45-degree angle, the right side crumpled against the pavement from hood to tail. A man in a business suit with spider webs of blood spun from his ear and forehead was laid out on the front seat. A thin man with glasses was reaching up and in the opened driver's door, tending the wounds.

"Watch this," mouthed Jesse, trying to force his shirttails back into his belt under the light smock.

He stepped boldly around the compactor. "What happened here? He hit the rail?"

The man with glasses half-turned, startled. He quickly sized up Jesse and his partner — too quickly, thought Jaime, his heart dropping.

"I'm a doctor," announced the man. He started toward his own car, parked at the end of the pad. Just then the bottleneck ahead on the freeway unclogged momentarily, for the river of stagnating cars revved up and surged forward a few choppy feet. "Just — let this be," sighed the doctor arbitrarily, flattening his hands in the haze. "I've got him sedated right now."

Jesse ambled forward. "Looks like you're pretty near to having a dead man on your hands, doc," he said.

"Who are you people?" snapped the doctor.

"We were just passing by. Our unit's back there. Thought we might be of some — "

The doctor's cool gray eyes flicked between the two men. "You thought you might make a bootleg sale or two, eh? Well, you can just go on. Go on, now."

"We're in business to help people, same as you, sir. Now if this is an emergency, why, you know, we might be in a position to help you save this poor guy's life." Jesse stepped closer. "Any internal injuries?"

"Listen, you. I'm the doctor. I pulled off to assist, and I can only hope to God I'm not too late. I've already called for an ambulance. This man is going to Central Receiving. Go on now, get going, before I call for a COPter."

"Uh, your ambulance is close by, is it?"

The doctor fumbled with his stethoscope and shook it at Jesse. It flopped like a serpent. Impatient and indignant, he strode up to Jesse and almost struck him across the face with it.

Jaime looked down at his fingernails.

"Under the laws of the State of California I can have you arrested," threatened the doctor. "You realize that?"

"Don't know what you're getting at," said Jesse cordially. "Mr. Sandoval here and I were just returning from a two-car call on the Ventura Freeway and — "

"Not only your license to buy and sell," continued the doctor, "but my own license to practice. Oh, I know your game, all right. I know how you independents operate. I wasn't born yesterday. Moving in like vultures when you spot a quick touch, taking what you want with or without authorization, selling your wares to anyone fool or desperate enough not to ask questions! I'm going to call in a complaint right now." He turned and headed for the red phone box on the rail. *"What's the number on your van?"*

Jaime, facing backwards, touched his partner's arm. "Hey, Jesse, maybe we better…"

Just then an undulating wail, unnoticed till now, increased to an ear-splitting level and an ambulance, long and shiny with Day-Glow lights flashing, screeched up the connecting ramp. Its doors and tailgate flung

open and a stretcher touched down before it had stopped. Two antiseptic attendants sprang down and snapped back a side panel. A new portable vacutrans unit gleamed at the ready. They lugged it out and headed for the wreck.

Jaime looked at Jesse.

"Jeezus H. Christ," said Jesse. "Looks like the sons of bitches beat us out again." He ran his stubby fingers through his short, oily black hair. "Come on, kid," he muttered. "Let's get out of here. We're wasting time."

"Do you think the van'll start now?"

Jesse whistled two descending notes. "Get in," he said.

Jaime got in. He ground the starter again and again.

"Come on, come on," growled Jesse. He climbed in and struggled with the engine cover between the seats. "I think I hear something. Let's go. Piss on it. God damn, I'll get it going."

He yanked his smock up under his arms. His shirt was unbuttoned halfway already. Jaime saw the wide segmented plastic belt hanging over Jesse's belly and swallowed his surprise. He watched Jesse unhook the belt, position it above the overheated fuel pump and pull the stopper. Amber liquid poured down over the metal, steaming, until the reservoir was empty. Jaime stuck his head out the window and took a breath.

A whirring sound began in his ear. He moved his hand to brush it away. Then he noticed the COPter dipping low. The policeman touched down on the other side of the compactor.

"Hey," suggested Jaime.

"Don't tell me."

The policeman lowered his arm, stopped the whirling blades and folded them back into the nightstick. He went to the wrecked vehicle first.

"That'll cool her down," grunted Jesse, fastening the empty belt and covering it again with his clothing.

Jaime floored the accelerator and twisted the key. The engine turned over and caught.

"Tromp on it," said Jesse.

They cut away from the freeway, slipped back onto the Harbor at Eighth and connected with the Santa Monica. The traffic smoothed out a little. They passed an empty Chinese GT buckled against the Adams off, an

overturned milk tanker covered with flies in the center lane at La Brea, an impossible-looking two-car head-on at the Robertson on-ramp, five or six stalled cars on or near the next few crashpads at quarter-mile intervals and a grotesque four-car pileup smeared across as many lanes just before Washington. Jaime slowed, but Jesse pointed at the two independent units already converging on the scene; it wasn't worth their time. Above it all, lacing the sky in a dense crosshatching, were the circling COPters, officers of the law hand-strapped to their spinning, humming nightsticks, about to drop in a black swarm.

"I thought he was gonna stop us back there."

"What? Aw, they know their job. They can't hassle a unit doing legal business at an accident."

"Good thing we got started, anyway," said Jaime. "The fine for a breakdown on — "

"The bastards."

The van roared on.

"I think it's about six, Jesse."

"Don't rub it in. But we can't go back yet. I got a wife and kid to feed."

"I guess I'm lucky," said Jaime.

"My kid, she ain't got a tooth in her head. My wife made one big mistake, that's for sure."

They passed the LAST SANTA MONICA EXIT sign.

"She loses a tooth, my wife tells her to put it under her pillow for the fairy. Some fairy. I leave her a quarter. Next thing you know, she's pullin' out teeth to get more money. I can't afford to give her no allowance. She's a good kid, real smart, she understands — business is tough. But this fairy shit. I don't have the heart to tell her. So pretty soon she's got no more teeth. Whadaya think of that? Take this street here."

They prowled the blocks off Lincoln, Jesse calling the turns, and found themselves eventually on Navy. Jesse dipped his head, scanning the small houses and narrow corners in the protracted twilight.

"This is more like it," he said.

They hung a left and steered on deeper into a disintegrating neighborhood. Jaime felt tense. Once they passed an automatic patrol; Jaime straightened his arm to wave, caught himself when he heard Jesse snicker, and pretended to adjust the sideview mirror instead. He had to remind himself that nothing more than a TV scanner swept the passing

streets from behind the aluminized windows. Jaime felt a familiar fear throbbing low in his back.

"Turn here," ordered Jesse. The tips of his fingers rubbed together.

"Here?"

"Yeah. I can feel it. Can't you?"

Jaime started to shrug, stopped. "I'm…not sure," he said.

Halfway along the short block, parked at an odd angle, was an old sedan. Years of unrepaired dents trimmed the body, a few half-heartedly pounded out and coated with fading primer, the edges of the dents now rusted in permanently. A shadow moved to one side within the car and a dark shape shifted by the open passenger door.

"Well, well," said Jesse, "let's see what we got here."

The van cut its lights, passed slowly.

"We got one," announced Jesse.

They pulled up in front of the car.

Jesse studied the rearview mirror. "All right, boy," he said. "Let me do the talking." He jerked open his door and lumbered to the curb.

"Hello, good evening. Any trouble here?"

A woman stood up uncertainly. Jaime saw her; something stirred in him. "Why, uh, ye-es," she said, eyeing them, their van. Then, relieved into a decision: "Can you help me, please?"

Jesse grew bolder. "Let's just see what the trouble is here." He spoke with authority. "Stand aside," he ordered.

Jaime edged out and watched by the van. His senior partner certainly knew his job — there was no doubt about that now — and he tried to listen to catch a few pointers.

"…Just went out of control," she was saying. It was hard to hear. Two little faces studied Jaime from the window. She went on explaining how her husband had lost control of the car. "Just keeled over" were the words she used over and over.

"Get the litter," yelled Jesse.

The young man swung open the back panel and brought the water litter, flipping on the heater in the handle. An overweight man in a metallic green suit was sprawled on the front seat. They turned his legs and Jesse cradled his head, not too carefully, thought Jaime, as they hauled him out. His hat with the fishing lure in the band fell into the gutter.

"You going to be all right," the woman said over the man. "Oooh…"

They wheeled the litter to the van. The water pad slogged and gurgled under the body. Jesse pulled a lever and the tailgate lifted them inside.

Jesse strapped an electrode plate over the chest. He clicked on the diagnostic scanner and checked the dials hurriedly, preoccupied. The man groaned and the respiration dial wavered.

"He all right? Isn't he?" the woman called in a high voice from outside.

Jesse shot a look at the young man. It pressed him hard, relentlessly, and Jaime felt himself shrinking in his clothes.

With a grunt Jesse stumbled out and walked ominously to the car. He clasped his hands at his back and lowered his head.

Jaime heard him say, "Your husband — he is your husband, right?"

"Yes sir, we just…"

"Well, your husband is dead. At the present time."

She protested, then raged, then wailed, but Jesse talked her through it. At last she nearly collapsed against the car. Jaime had seen it before. Only this time the sequence wasn't right. He was confused.

"Well, do something, please! Oh sweet Lord!"

"I think we caught him in time," said Jesse. "But if we had put him in suspension just a few minutes earlier — "

"Oh, Lord, Lord…!"

"I can try, that's all I can do. Uh, I'll need your card."

The woman opened the car door and practically fell inside. One of the children started crying. She dumped out her handbag and clawed through the contents.

Jesse took the credit plate from her. "We'll be right with you," he said. "I wish I could make you a firm promise. But we'll do our best," he added, almost cheerfully.

Back in the van, Jesse snapped his fingers. "Run a thermal on him," he barked.

"Jesse, why did you say he was dead?"

"Talk later! Get on the stick! We don't want no interference to drive up."

Jaime turned on the thermal table and watched the scope nervously as the shapes of organs wavered into bright color focus on the analyzer. The lungs expanded, shrank, the heart hesitated, swelled, pulsed feebly. Most of the colors were right. But streaming heat outlines of the wrong color clotted the pulmonary artery. The victim, his body a rising, straining knot, labored through congested membranes for breath.

Jesse took out a syringe.

"Give him this, quick. I don't want him to check out ahead of time. Or we'll have to work mighty fast. He isn't even in suspension. It's a massive coronary, looks like." He riffled the plastic overleaves of the anatomy directory, found the page. "Yeah. What's it matter? He's gone anyway."

"What won't matter, Jesse?" asked the young man, slipping the needle under a pinch of ashen skin.

"You're about to learn a lesson, boy. A big one."

He bounced around the interior of the van, flicking on the vacutract unit, turning on the UV in the body dome overhead, checking the temperature on the storage compartment, cursing when he snagged his jagged thumbnail on his smock. He switched on the autoclave and dared it to heat fast enough.

He hovered, his belly hanging over the edge of the table. "No dice. Adrenalin's not enough, eh? Good, fine, I don't care."

"Jesse?"

"*Wha-at*. Get his clothes off."

Jaime wanted to ask what they were doing. How they could operate without a certificate of death from a doctor or a requisition for parts from a regular ambulance unit. Wanted to know if Jesse was worried about their license to extract and sell. Wanted to know why—but he understood why Jesse had said the man was dead already now as the plastic blimp descended from the roof and suctioned onto the body like a leech. It was too late, anyway. The laser knife made its first incision.

"Sure, Jesse. I got it."

The autowaldoes whispered in unison, almost with anticipation under the bubble. At the first stroke came a cry from outside the van as the wife fell in despair. At the same instant a bubbling groan came from the man on the table. Then the last breath whistled out of him like air from a shriveling balloon. Jesse punched a pattern for kidneys, spleen, gall bladder, pancreas, for nearly everything but the overtasked heart. And the liver. "Damn liver," he mumbled disgustedly. "He was a boozer, the lousy — " The stainless steel pincers poised and peeled back layers and lifted and groped, severed and sutured and weighed, calipered and deposited the organs in the vacuum tube to the nitrogen bank and then finished up neatly with a muffled sucking sound. The scissor-point fingers suspended over the corpse, flashing and switching for a moment, and then retracted. The body was left gutted.

Jaime tried to say something.

"Don't mean a thing, kid. He's garbage now."

Jaime heard the sound of a car passing far away, a bird on the wires outside, the racing of his own heart. He didn't know anything to say.

His partner pulled a body envelope out of the 'clave, wrapped the body, sealed it with the sealing iron. Seconds, minutes passed but Jaime could think of nothing to say.

He saw Jesse wheel the litter to the tailgate, press the button to lower it, climb out and push it to the old car. The woman screamed. She seemed to lose her mind when she saw it. Jesse struggled with her until he could inject her with a tranquilizer. She slumped into the car. He tossed the credit plate in after her. Then he put the bag by the lamppost on the cracked sidewalk. The bulb was burned out but Jaime saw clearly the formless encapsulated remains like a giant slug caught on the cement. He saw the two little black faces staring and crying. The children were jumping up and down on the car seat now. They kept their fingers in their mouths; spittle ran down their dark wrists, leaving their cold fingers glistening. Tears streamed alongside their flat noses, shining them, and their brown eyes wavered and glittered like jewels. When Jesse started toward them with needles Jaime called out. Tried to call out. His throat was a single dry, painful muscle. He bit down until his jaws hurt. Their eyes were looking at him.

Jesse headed back to the van.

"Get out! Up front! We're not clear yet."

Jaime moved but not fast enough. Jesse grabbed him by the smock and flung him toward the cab. "Start it up. Start it!"

Jesse took over. He stuffed Jaime into the front seat and gunned the engine. His ferret eyes darted about the empty street. "We got to make this look right." He slammed into reverse, drew back, shifted into first and pulled up to the tail of the car. Then he locked against the car and rammed it forward into the lamppost. There was a grinding and buckling of metal and a splintering of glass. A piece of the lamp hit the top of the car, rolled off and shattered on the street into a million unrepairable fragments.

On the way back, Jesse would not stop talking.

"That coon'll never find out who we were," he was saying. "Just like we used to do it in 'Nam. The first 'tract and 'trans units came in while I was

over there. We used to keep the ARVN forces up with transes from the body count. 'Got to keep the war machine running!' they told us. Then there wasn't enough. We finally had to get into our own casualties. The NCOs told us to get what we needed off our own. They wouldn't let us take nothing off the whites. We got some of the brown brothers together and made sure ours got left alone. We had to look somewhere. Most of the civilians, the gooks, were too small. Women, kids. So we came down on the nigger bodies. We made *sure* there were always enough of 'em. Then they started transing stateside. Right away there were too many patients, not enough donors. I coulda told 'em *that* was gonna happen. So when we got on the outs we went into business, me and Raoul. We wasn't the only ones. There are plenty of units like us. Sure, plenty now."

Jesse settled back, moving his belly behind the wheel.

"Whatsamatter, kid? We made a good hit." He patted the thermostat. "We'll sell 'em tomorrow. Or the next day. Don't worry."

They squealed around a corner and headed up the long gray ramp to the freeway. They passed a collision but two independent units were wheeled into place next to it already, the two drivers haggling over the rights. Jaime saw a fist pounding the air.

"Me, now I got something to worry about." Jesse yanked the drainage belt loose under his smock. "Damn pisser. Gotta get me some new kidneys. You ever have a tube runnin' up your dick? I'll get 'em, though. That's for sure. Long as it's not off no damn spade."

They sped past accident after accident, metal and chrome and flesh spattered over and over again across lanes for miles, as if part of the same accident. And always the vans moving in from all directions, cutting across dividers, heading against the traffic, closing in.

"I need a lotta stuff, just for myself." Jesse bit fiercely at his torn thumbnail. "Old ticker won't hold up forever. Not to mention the rest of me. Get pains in the middle of the night, you know?"

He turned his head on the thick stalk of his neck.

He glanced across at Jaime. His eyes roamed over Jaime's thin body, the strong young muscles, the firm abdomen. He smiled, a crack splitting his cruel brown face.

Jaime was hypnotized by the passing lights. His eyes focused on the sideview mirror outside the door. He saw that his jaw hung slack, his mouth half open as if to speak, as it had been for mile after endless mile. He saw

the white, sharp, strong teeth, good teeth, the kind anyone would be proud to own. He sat gripping the religious medal around his neck, so tightly it burned his hand.

"Don't let it get to you, kid. It's that damn smog. It's worse'n a sacka onions." He slid his fleshy hands down to the bottom of the steering wheel. "But it's all in a day's work, I guess. Be home with my wife an' kid in a few more minutes. Welcome to the Company, Jaime. We *need* somebody like you. Believe me." When he heard no answer he said, "That is your name, right? Jaime?"

But Jaime did not hear him. He was back on the dark street, waiting, but she would not stop. She would not stop screaming.

On the Pike

His name was Geoff and he had been seeing her for seven weeks, ever since; almost exactly, in fact. Her name was Sherron. She was nineteen-and-a-half and a Fine Arts major, and he had met her at the semiannual Students Arts & Crafts Sale in the sculpture patio among the kilns and unfinished steel and bronze weldings, the finished ones as well all jagged, angular jumbles resembling knives, halberds and rusty sheets in the sun and concrete shadows.

A crowd of women in floral print dresses cooed over her bowls and ceramic teapots; her dishes were going like hotcakes. He had short-cut through the Arts wing on his way back to the House, and now circled in the unexpected activity, arriving at her table by natural course.

Tracing with his finger a caricatured Uncle Sam glazed blue-and-russet on a centerpiece plate she had tagged *not for sale*, he thickened his lower lip and nodded in a knowing wrap-up and turned to leave.

"Wait!" She waved through her customers, edging to the end of the table.

"You talking to me?"

"Um. Do you have a match?"

She was pretty, cute, close enough to it, at least. He nodded and fished in his windbreaker.

"Thanks." She ignored the pottery hounds — they were picking over the last few pieces, anyway—and watched his eyes. "Do you have a cigarette?"

He watched back, came up with two.

She cradled her elbow in her other hand and flexed the cigarette in her fingers. He lit hers and then his, waiting ceremoniously for the sulfur to burn off first. She cupped her hands, small and gray with dried clay, around his and inhaled.

"Do you have a car?" she asked, without blinking.

He had to laugh. "What's your — " Only then did he recognize her as the girl his roommate had pointed out in the cafeteria. That one'll help you forget, man, Greg had smirked. She'll go out with an-y-one. For one night. "Your name's Sherron, isn't it?"

"Mm-hm. I have to get to the USC Dental Clinic by three o'clock. I have an appointment."

She stared him down.

He glanced at his watch. "Three o'clock, huh?"

"I thought afterwards we could go to my place. I could make you some Ovaltine, or something."

When he looked up she was smiling. Really smiling. "You're not putting me on, are you." He said it like he already knew the answer.

"No," she said. And she wasn't, either.

So it had gone: from icepacking a wisdom tooth socket all the first night, to breakfast *and* lunch *and* dinner, to the friendly, slippery morning showers, till it was too damn much trouble driving back to the House for periodic supplies of books, money, underwear and socks. He had moved out, and moved in. One night they passed in and out of each other's eyes for hours, each leaning forward as if to enter a mirror held by the other, and out again, and then again. So they would get married—no shit. She acted as if she didn't care about that part at first, though she warmed to it after introducing him to her sisters in West Covina. Some nights he dreamed he had stuck his neck out an open skyscraper window, but made himself leave it there on the sill, daring the window to come crashing down and behead him. He had broken through to the other side, and he was going to stay there, no matter what.

So that now, after a basketball game at the Long Beach Sports Arena, they found themselves mousing their way back in a determinedly unhurried stumble-pace to the car. A few colored lights remained on along the Nu-Pike, an old boardwalk fronting the parking lot, and the bulbs reflected in the easy tide lapping the sandy bar, breaking up like winking Christmas lights in the gently strafed waters.

"Hey," she said, "I wanna ride the roller coaster!"

"Naw," he said, tightening his arm on her neck, steering, "come on, they tore it down, remember?"

"No, then, well, so what?" insisted Sherron. "We can still have fun!"

"You want to get mugged? There's nothing over there but winos and sailors."

"Come *on*. You can buy me a cotton candy, or something."

A country-and-western bar was letting out in the amusement park. The couples sashayed away, all sequin shirts and wide dresses, their dishwater children, he imagined, left under blue TV screens in paper-thin rooms somewhere; he couldn't hold back a bitter thought of Jeannie and the hick

veteran she had run to the altar with — was it only seven weeks ago? Some kind of square. He had seen him once. Probably has tattoos, thought Geoff.

Sherron led him past boarded-up concession stands, a fortune-telling parlor with frayed tassel drapes and a palmistry chart the size of a hyperthyroid octopus. The pavement glistened with stains of indeterminate origin, shiny smears like the ones found on garden leaves and walkways the morning after a rain. A huge plastic model of a hot-dog-on-a-stick thrust out from a stand in an obscene beckoning. In the dim glass, beyond her reflection, he saw dark and cooling game machines and wilted stuffed animals. He stood staring, trying hard to think of something, when she began pulling excitedly at his sleeve.

She pointed to a spot a hundred feet down the pike, where stragglers had drifted to form a crowd in front of a small wooden platform.

"It looks like a show! Oh, can we go?"

A man with a neck microphone was gesturing at the canvas behind him, and now Geoff heard a tired voice reverberating between the rows of empty rides and abandoned booths.

He caught up with her just as the pitchman introduced a girl in a turquoise harem costume. The pitchman promised a mystifying, stupefying and mesmerizing demonstration, "one which you will remember the longest day you live.

"But first," he pressed on, his moustache brushing the microphone like the sound of a riffled stack of bills, "allow me to call your attention to what I hold here in my left hand…."

He held up a blue roll of tickets. All day long, he said, he had been selling admissions at one dollar per. He made a rhetorical bet that some "within the sound of my voice now" had paid that full price time and again to see the very same show that was about to go on again inside the tent.

"But this is our last performance of the night and, tell you what, I'm going to put these away." He held up a pink roll. "That's right, *fifty cents*, the regular child's price — this time and this time only!" To a faceless man in the booth: "Herb, don't sell any more of these adult tickets tonight…."

"I bet he says that every time," whispered Geoff.

"Shh!"

Then the barker called everyone — there were only twelve or fifteen — in close to the platform, so they would not miss the mind-boggling demonstration he had promised.

He tied her wrists to a splintered, cross-like T-square (to force truth from her before the trick was over?). Geoff watched her writhe in the soft ropes, her bejeweled navel rising and falling above a low gilt belt. Now the latecomers, almost all men, pressed intently to the platform, their eyes rolling over her like ball bearings on a washboard.

"She's wearing a wig," Sherron interjected. "And there's a rip in her armpit. *Poor thing.*"

The barker pitched and persuaded and promised and enticed and the audience, grown restless, flicked eyes from the word pictures flying like spittle-moths from his mouth to the painted poster renderings strung up against the tarp:

Pin Head, an androgynous mystery.

Mister Frozo.

Petrified Man.

The Human Pin Cushion.

A sword swallower with the neck of a giraffe.

A fire eater.

And a geek, curiously unexplained.

He started a portable phonograph, promising admittance for those in line before the music stopped — "Limited standing room!" — and then, don't blink, the girl whipped her freezing hands out of the ties, hiding them in her veil as she ducked inside.

They got in.

Geoff smelled sawdust and something he didn't want to name as they inched away from the closed flap. His eyes strained to open to the dim light. Sherron hung on his sleeve, her breast pushing into his arm, and he liked that, and then remembered why: Jeannie, walking home from school in their sophomore year, before he had gotten his car. He hadn't known what it had meant, that memory, until now, and he fought it, everything about Jeannie, Geoff and Jeannie, Jeannie and Geoff. Well, the hell with her. He had something different now, and better, he told himself, and he wasn't going to give it up. It didn't matter, it didn't, what his friends said, that he was only on the rebound…

He put his arm around his fiancée.

The sword swallower slid an assortment of smooth chromed blades into his gullet, starting each one carefully and then allowing the weighted handle to glide it down all the way. He wiped them before with a rag reeking of

antiseptic, drawing them swiftly up and out and wrapping them neatly away at the end.

"That's easy," confided Sherron, "see, he just tips his head so far back his whole throat opens."

"Yeah, sure, but how does he keep from throwing up?"

"Aw," said Sherron, "I wanna see something good!"

The magic show was slow and tacky; it was the sword swallower again, doing double duty. He struggled through a levitation with the girl in the harem costume. He got her up on the board, then kicked out the chairs, *then* put the sheet over her—he had forgotten; and every time she started to tip one way or the other he had to yell back at the shabby curtain for someone to tighten the wires.

It was the last show of the night, all right. Geoff felt embarrassed for the man, he couldn't help it. But Sherron laughed. She was getting restless, he could tell.

Pin Head was asleep, they were told.

Mister Frozo was down for the last time, too, laid out on a bed of nails surrounded by twenty-five-pound blocks of ice like the ones that come down the chutes of vending sheds in small towns. You didn't want to stand too close to the table, with the dirt and straw melting to mush underneath. Mister Frozo, a beefy pink man without expression, appeared at first, too, to be asleep, and perhaps he had been for hours; the outline of his body had sunk deep into the icy supports; when he got up, if he did when the show was over, he would leave behind a mantle of Gaudí architecture, clear shivering crystals like the pointed slopes of translucent icebergs.

But just then Mister Frozo, prodded, did sit up, lifting slowly at the waist like a rigor mortised cadaver, so that all could see the deep hole-like indentations quilted into his back.

"Sit on him!" someone suggested, and a girl laughed.

Shuddering, Geoff stepped ahead to the next stall. The cold was beginning to get to him. He rubbed his hands, breathed into them.

Next in line was the Petrified Man.

Geoff stood reading the signboard while Jeannie, no, it was Sherron, moved over with him, and then the others led by the sword swallower. The sign was crudely lettered and spelled, as if by a child. This is what it said:

THE MAN 14,000 YRS. YOUNG!

This perfect Specimen of a MUMMY unearthed in North Amer. Continent
by Archeologists in the Place: Puebla, Mex. in the year: 1939 A.D. The
Prehistoric Man was a member of the Clovis Culture (12,000–10,000 B.C.)
*and made his own Lanceolated Spear Points using the Flint or Chip Method *
of design. He is therefore assumed to be a Hunter, several of his Tribesmen
were found nearby & were also known to be Hunter's also. He made his
home a rude Wickiup made of sticks or branches and the skins of Animals
he Tracked & Killed. He is preserved so timelessly by the High Altitude &
Dry Climate, so that he was preserved whereas his Tribesmen were not.
Look carefully and you will see authenticated Hair, Fingernails. You have
just witnessed the Most Perfect Speciman of Man of his Era on Earth!!

Truly An Unforgettable Sight

The sword swallower recited the same words out loud. And that was that, except that those who wanted a closer look were given time to file past Petrified Man in his plastic-capped pine box, a very realistic mock-up, brown and taut and convoluted as a chestnut. Uneasily Geoff noticed the teeth.

Sherron no longer clung to his arm. He turned and snared her wrist out of the stragglers shuffling to the far end of the tent.

"You don't want to see any more, do you?"

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think it's a stone drag," he answered soberly.

"Oh, come *on*," she said, "we never have any fun," and that brought him up short.

A drunk, a pair of sailors similar as bookends, a girl from the country-and-western bar, an overweight, rumpled, lonely man with perpetual five o'clock shadow, a young crewcut with his sleeves rolled, picking his nose slowly after a hard day and night at the pinballs, Geoff and his girl and three or four—who could be sure? — other furtive presences on the fringe. They found themselves clumped together before the last platform.

The sword swallower went into a low-key spiel about fire-eating.

Someone yawned loudly and left the tent.

Hearing that, the sword swallower gave up. He dropped to the edge of the platform and tried an informal huddle.

First he dipped a black-tipped wire — it was something like a coat hanger with a charred marshmallow at the end — in fluid and ignited it with a whoosh.

He spat out a medicinal lozenge and showed the inside of his mouth. He lifted his tongue. "No," he answered candidly, "my mouth's not coated with anything. You don't *need* anything to do this," and Geoff believed him. In fact, this casual revelation was the first thing he had believed tonight.

Fixing his eyes on the ceiling, the sword swallower popped the fireball in and closed quickly to extinguish it. "It's the fumes," he said. "The fumes are what's burning, not the wad. You cut off the air, that's it." He picked a second wire from the jar and lit it with his Zippo. Black smoke wisped upward.

"See, I can put my fingers right through it." He cupped his hand through the glowing aurora around the fireball. "See, it's the vapors burning," he said, flashing his smudged palm. "That's what you call the fumes."

"Don't you ever burn your mouth?" someone asked.

"You get numb to it. I been doing this for years." He plucked two more torches, holding them between his knuckles like xylophone sticks, and ignited them. "The trick is to hold your breath, or you suck fire."

"Yeah, but did you ever get burned?"

He twirled the first torch toward his lips in a graceful, surprisingly feminine gesture, dousing it quickly, and then the pair of torches together. He inserted them rapidly, aiming cleanly into the center of his open mouth. A second longer and the flames would lick his nose and chin, would sweep up the rod to his fingers.

"Sure, I been burned. Wouldn't you?"

He hunkered closer. He stretched back his thin lip with his thumb to reveal a beaded chain of small blisters lining the inner membrane. Someone drew a breath.

"I been burned more times than I can remember. *Every part that can burn has been.*"

Geoff took a close look at him. The face was one of those the age of which, once past puberty, is incomputable, rawboned and alert, every trace of self-indulgence long gone from it. The eyes were a startling eggshell blue, transparent as water, the nose pointed, nostrils pinched, the bridge pitted with blackheads as his cheeks were pitted with scars. The short, coarse hair shone from working in the sun, and the skin reflected a bright oil sheen. The expression on the sword swallower's face was a kind of detached mercilessness, toward itself as well as the world. It was a face seen at shooting gallery machines in Greyhound Bus depots the country over, and it was a law unto itself.

"You all probably want to see this," he said.

He felt behind him, came up with a 45 rpm record. Geoff tried to read the label. The sword swallower held it as if displaying a product, and a certain indefatigable pride showed through now in spite of the late hour.

He bit the record about an inch into the grooves, grimacing, his teeth dry and white and bone-like. The vinyl cracked and crumbled. He showed the disk, a rough half-moon missing from the edge. He began to chew. His eyes clenched, his jaws vibrated. The plastic broke and ground to powder. He chewed till nothing but black grounds remained in his mouth. He balled the powder into a clod and wiped it into a handkerchief.

A girl's voice tried to interrupt.

He held up a hand and went on cleaning his teeth and gums with his fingers. Then, "Hey," he called behind the curtain. He waited, hand out. "You know what I want." The curtain wobbled. A deep, unseen voice grumbled. "Don't give me any of that," he snapped.

He dropped his eyes to the bottom of the curtain, reached over and picked up a light bulb.

He turned it in his fingertips. Then he cracked it on the stage like an egg, took a curved, opaque wafer and positioned it in his mouth. He began to chew in a rolling motion, grinding it to dust. He extended his tongue to show the pile of shining particles, then picked off the ground glass cautiously, daubing with the handkerchief.

"Why don't you swallow it?" asked a girl.

"Who said that?" he asked coolly, but the spectators were hidden in the shadows. "I can swallow it. You want to see me swallow it?"

"Don't it hurt your innards?" asked a man's voice. It was one of the sailors, in front, and he sounded genuinely interested.

"Sure it does. What do you think? Let me ask you something. Wouldn't it hurt you?"

No answer.

"What did you say?"

Finally, "Then — " The sailor did not finish.

"It's something I do," answered the sword swallower.

He took a bent pack of Kools from his pants pocket, straightened one with careful strokes. He lit it, inhaling deeply. Seconds passed. A board fell outside, and heavy shoes somewhere.

"Let's see you put that cigarette in your mouth," said a girl.

He looked into the darkness, his face hard as rock. Then he laid the cigarette on his tongue, the glowing tip protruding from his mouth, and simply flicked it inside like a chameleon. Smoke blew out his nose. Then he opened his mouth, flicking the cigarette back out and down.

"Satisfied?" he said to the darkness. He wasn't smiling.

"Let's see you put it out."

The sword swallower held a deep breath, let it out slowly and with great control. He cocked an eye knowingly. "Let's hear the rest of it," he said.

A giggle.

"No. Come on. You want to say something, say it."

"Let's see you put that cigarette *out* in your mouth, I said."

No, thought Geoff. Don't let her make you.

The sword swallower sat forward, elbows braced on knees. He stared at the cigarette. His expression was unreadable. He took a hard drag and tapped the ash, rolling the cigarette between his fingers. He made a short, bitter sound that might have been a laugh, straightened his back, crossed his left ankle on his right thigh, dragged again, tapped the ash again so that the bare coal was hot and bright in the air.

"I can do it, you know. I've done it before. It'll blister for four days, then it'll hurt like hell. But I can do it. What's the matter, you think I can't?"

Geoff cleared his throat. "Man," he offered, "you don't have to prove anything." Uncertainly he added, "The hell with her, see?"

The sword swallower looked at Geoff, or as near as he could come to him in the shadows. The eyes, sharp and steely, would not give him away. Strange eyes, Geoff thought. The eyes were looking at him.

The sword swallower put his feet down and flexed his legs, half-standing. He opened his mouth, showed his tongue. Then, you know what he did. You know what he did then.

He put out the cigarette on his tongue.

"Didn't it…" A throat caught. "Didn't it hurt?"

"Sure it hurt." The sword swallower stepped up to the curtain. "Sure I feel it. *Wouldn't you?"*

Geoff pivoted, somewhat unsteadily. The show must be over, he thought.

Now where was she?

The others stretched and bumped together like wind-up dolls suddenly activated on the dirt floor.

"Exit to your left. This show is—"

"Hey, you're the Pin Head, right? I seen this show before."

Geoff craned his neck. The fat, rumpled man was speaking. To a new man on the platform, come out from behind the curtain.

And there was Sherron, edging over.

"Psst," whispered Geoff, "over here! You're blind as a bat, aren't you? I was looking for—"

"Is that the Pin Head?" She gave him her hands but not her attention.

Geoff sighed. "That's all, honey," he said, "there ain't no more."

"I am the Human Pin Cushion," said the man on the stage.

"I wanna see some more," said Sherron.

The man heard her. "Very well," he said, since the sailors had stopped by the tent flap, blocking the others from leaving.

Her fingers were cold. Geoff wanted to pull away but made himself hold on.

The man, the Human Pin Cushion, was old, old. Bushy brows. A tight, unexpected cupid's-bow mouth between his hanging jowls.

Sherron laughed.

"Don't — " say any more, thought Geoff. There was something about her voice he did not like.

The old man checked his watch resignedly, slid back his sleeve as he took out a pair of spectacles. He had an old leather eyeglass case clipped over his pocket. Without enthusiasm, he produced a long, gleaming hatpin

from an envelope. He waved the people closer and prepared himself, pinching up the loose rice-paper skin on his wrist. It pulled into a familiar fold.

"Hey," said a girl, "that picture outside, it shows you sticking pins all over your body."

"That is correct." The old man hesitated, needle poised. "I have passed steel through all areas of my body. I have performed for *The Johnny Car*—" He stopped himself, drew off his glasses, gazing out. "What is it you would have me do?"

"Stick it through your…your…" Giggle. The girl's voice. "Oh, through your tongue."

Geoff forced himself to look.

It was Sherron. It had been her voice all along.

"My God, Sher…" He tried to say her name. "My God."

The old man was looking at her, and so was everyone else. She had come up close to the stage. "No, not that. I've already seen that. Stick it through…"

"Yes, young lady?"

"…Through, oh, your ear," she said impatiently. "Stick it in your ear!"

The old man checked his watch again. The show was folding. He studied her. He pushed back his hair, badly in need of a cut, folded his long ear forward. Salt-and-pepper hairs encrusted the opening above the pendulous lobe. Light from a single miniature spotlight turned the flesh a warm peach color.

He raised the long needle. He held his ear with one hand, placed the point behind the lobe, and pushed it through.

"Not there," said Sherron, "anybody can do that!"

The old man stared her down. He folded his upper ear and pressed with a slow, trembling force, driving the tip through the cartilage in a tiny stirring motion.

He stepped to the edge, the needle penetrating his ear in two places. He looked down past his chins at the girl. At Sherron.

"You are satisfied now?" he asked.

"How come you don't bleed?" she said defiantly.

The old man stepped back. He grasped the ball on the end of the needle. "This show," he said, "is over." And then, to Sherron alone, he said:

"What do you think I am? Don't you think we are human?

"Of course we bleed."

He pulled the needle as if lowering a sword from salute.

A stream of blood coursed immediately from his ear. It gushed down his neck and spattered to the boards.

Then he left the stage.

Geoff forced a path out. He put a hand to his forehead and hurried away from the pike. He was aware of the tarpaulined machinery of thrill rides, canvased shapes and empty attractions. A mist of dew was already forming on the glass of the fortune shop but he did not see it as he passed. He zipped his windbreaker and continued to his car, refusing to break stride, and as the girl named Sherron strove to keep pace, laughing at him, cajoling, finally silent and unintentionally merciful as the fog rolled in, he felt, no, he knew at last that he was alone now, after all, quite alone.

White Moon Rising

It went like this: in her room at the top of the stairs in the empty sorority house she lay warm and rumpled in her bed, trying hard to sleep some more. It was now near noon and the light streaming through the open curtains had forced her awake again. She did not seem to care if she ever got up; she had no classes, not for a week. Still she could not make herself relax. The late morning flashed a granular red through her eyelids. Then she heard the front door down below open and close, the click echoing through the abandoned house like a garbage can dropped in an alley at dawn. Probably it was one of the few remaining girls returning from an overnight date or to pick up books before leaving for vacation. Lissa hoped so. Now she could hear footsteps treading up the stairs. She tried to imagine who it was. The footsteps reached the top of the stairs and stopped. Firmly, deliberately the footfalls turned and came down the hall, toward her room. Maybe it was Sharon. She wanted it to be Sharon. She kept her eyes tightly closed. The shoes thumped deep into the rug; the loose board in the middle of the hail creaked. Finally whoever it was reached her room—there, just on the other side of the door. Lissa felt ice crystals forming in her blood. She waited for the knock, for the clearing of a familiar throat, for the sound of her own name to come muffled through the door. But there was no sound. Still she waited. She held a breath. The blood pulsed coldly in her ears like a drum beaten underwater. She wanted to speak out. Then the sound of a hand on the loose doorknob. And the almost imperceptible wing beat of the door gliding open. I know, she thought, I'll lie perfectly still, I won't let anything move in my body and I'll be safe, whoever it is won't see me and will go away. Yes, she thought, that's what I will have to do. Now she clearly felt a presence next to her bed. She was sure that someone was standing there in the doorway to her right, a hand probably still on the knob. She had not heard it rattle a second time. Time passed. She counted her heartbeats. At last she knew she could hold her breath no longer. She would have to do something very brave. With a rush that screamed adrenaline into her body she sat bolt upright, at the same instant snapping her head to the right and unsticking her eyes with a pop. There was no one there. The door was still closed and locked. The room was empty. Suddenly she realized that her kidneys were throbbing in dull pain. She knew what that was. It was fear.

The sunlight washed in through the window.

"Oh Joe," said his wife, "it makes me sick, just physically ill. And I know it gets to you, too."

Joe Mallory cleaned up the steak and eggs on his plate with a last swipe, then hesitated and let his fork mark a slow pattern through the smear of yolk that remained.

"No." He cleared his throat. "No, honey. Just a job." Gently he removed the newspaper from her side, poked it in half and tried to find something else to read.

"Joey," she said. She reached across the tablecloth suddenly and covered his hand. "I know you. And I know I shouldn't have let you take this job, not this one."

He looked up and was surprised and strangely moved to see her clear brown eyes glistening. As he forced his shoulders to shrug and his mouth to smile, she placed her other hand as well over his. From the open kitchen window sprang the sounds of bright chains of children on their way to the elementary school. He could almost see their black bowl haircuts and dirty feet. He wished he could help them, but it was already too late. He blinked, trying to concentrate.

"Babe," he said calmly, resurrecting a pet name they had abandoned before he went overseas. "One more semester and I'm finished with night classes. Look. You know the size of the government checks, and you know they aren't going to get any bigger. We both know Ray can't take me on without a degree—"

"You know he would, Joey, if you ask him again. What's a brother for?" Instantly she darkened, regretting the last. She held to his hand, hoping that he would let it pass.

"Now let me finish," he said slowly. "I can't handle a position like that yet, not without leaning on someone half the time. I have to do it right. This damned uniform is just a job until I'm ready. Till then, well, what else do I know? Really, now?" He flipped her hands over and warmed them with his. "I have to make things right before I go ahead, to feel like I'm my own man. I thought you understood that."

"Oh, I know all that. I'm sorry. I know. It was just all the details, the whole horrible thing, these last few weeks. It sounds so awful."

She rested her forehead on her arm and cried for a few seconds. Then she pressed her nose and stood up, stacking the dishes. "Come on, you big jock. You'll be late."

He pushed away from the table and crossed the kitchen in three steps. He took his wife in his arms and held her close for a long minute, while the electric clock hummed high and white on the wall.

She rocked back and forth with his body. Finally she began to laugh.

"Get out of here," she said, trying hard.

"Meet me at work," he said. "I'll take you to Fernando's for dinner."

The tears settled diamond-bright in her eyes. She kissed him noisily and pushed him out the door.

She watched him through the window.

He came back in.

"Forgot something," he said. He walked briskly to the breakfast nook, picked up the morning paper and dropped it in the waste can. "Give my love to the ice cream man," he said before he shut the door again.

"Hey, I don't even know the…"

He was gone and she stopped laughing. She went to the can and picked out the paper. She spread it on the table and stared down at it.

"Shit," she said very seriously. "Oh shit, Joe…."

The latest headline read:

Security Doubled
ANOTHER BRUTAL COED SLAYING

Lissa, now in tank top and embroidered Levi's, toed into her sandals and slipped down the stairs, her thin fingers playing lightly over the handrail.

"Sharon?" On the wall at the foot of the stairs she noticed the poster Sharon had brought with her from New York. It was one of those old *You Don't Have To Be Jewish To Love Levy's* advertisements, showing an Indian biting into a slice of rye bread; Sharon had replaced the Indian with the horribly burned face of an Asian child, and now she saw that someone had written across the face with a red marking pen the words *You Don't Have To Be A Unicorn To Enjoy The Tapestry* in an unmistakably feminine hand. She wondered what *that*

meant. "Has anybody seen Sharon?" she called, tapping her nails on the railing. Then, "Is anybody here?"

She thought she heard voices and stepped off the stairs. But she saw only the bright, still day outside the open front door, and the two familiar Security guards at the edge of the dry lawn. They stood with their hands behind their backs and, Lissa thought, peculiar smiles on their faces; as they rocked on their heels their billy clubs swung tautly from wide, black belts.

Something about them gave her the creeps.

Her eyes listlessly scanned the living room, finding nothing to settle on.

She stepped away from the open front door. Sharon must have left it open. On the way out, probably to see Eliot.

She could call Eliot and find out, couldn't she?

She took two steps toward the phone. She stopped. The thought of the newly-installed tap put her off again. Damn it, she thought. It irks me, just the idea of it. It really does.

She sighed. She stood in the middle of the rug, her left hand resting on the back of the sofa and her right hand fingering her left elbow. She took a breath, held it, let it out. Then she went over to the big front door and nudged it shut. With her back. She didn't particularly want to look outside.

Officer William W. Williams was doing push-ups on the grass.

"How many I got, John?"

"Uh, forty-seven by my count, Bill."

"You lyin'!"

"You're not going to break no record today, Williams," said Officer Hall around a lumpy chili dog from the food service machines.

"You shut up, Hal." Williams spat to one side and pumped three more times. The muscles on his shining arms inflated with each stroke.

"Fifty," said Joe matter-of-factly, "and still counting."

Williams quivered high on his corded arms for a beat, then dipped again.

"Mother," he breathed.

The sun, setting some kind of record for April, beat down in shimmering waves, now mercifully on the tin roof of the pergola so that the officers were able to remove their spongy hats, at least for half an hour. Joe felt not quite a breeze but at least a shift in the hovering air layers here in the shade; the sweat in his short black hair was beginning to evaporate, cooling and

contracting his scalp. It was, he thought without knowing why, a day for ice cream. Williams, however, chose to remain under the sun, bridging again and again over the blanched grass.

"What did the Chief have to say this morning?" asked Joe. "Sorry I missed the briefing."

The men did not answer.

As far as Joe could see the campus was deserted, the gray buildings flat and silent, the sparsely-sown trees moving not at all in the noonday heat. Though he knew better, Joe wondered idly if anyone other than Security was on the grounds today.

Old John, white-haired and better suited to a Santa Claus costume than a black uniform, folded his hands unsteadily.

"It was another one of his pep talks, Joe. You know Withers." Joe didn't very well, but it didn't matter. "I guess you didn't miss anything."

Hall resumed chewing.

Joe realized that Williams had suspended over the lawn. Finally he moved. *Down*.

"Well, I hope we get him," offered Joe, "and soon. A guy like that has got to be sick, and needs help."

Up. Williams stopped.

Hall stopped eating.

Joe felt odd. He repeated to himself what he had said, trying to figure why they were uptight. Something about Withers, maybe. Except for Old John, they didn't seem to like the Chief. That must be it.

"Hell," said Hall, "this is the easiest job in the world. We don't have to do anything. A person commits a violation, he does himself in." He spoke carefully, as if laying out a scientific fact. "Because if he's human, he's ashamed of the act. That's all the lever we need." Barely changing his tone he said, "Look at that one, will you?"

They looked. A young girl, slender and poised, was crossing the parking lot in old Levi's, very tight, and a form-fitting top.

Down. "Hoo. That one is sweet and tough," said Williams. *Up*.

"You take girls like that," Hall went on. "They don't have any sense of shame. Man, somebody's got to teach her a lesson."

"I'm not sure I follow you," said Joe.

Down. Williams rolled over onto his back. "Gimme some of that Dr. Pepper."

Hall cackled and took the bottle over to Williams. He knelt and whispered something. Williams nodded, then drained the bottle and lay back, gazing dreamily through the low trees by the pergola. "Somebody gimme my shirt an' gun." He sang a few notes to himself. "You know what we need around here?" he asked. "Bows an' arrows. That's what we had in 'Nam. Pick a sentry out of a tree at a hundred yards. *Whoosh*. Simple as that. Don't make no noise."

The girl was disappearing from sight.

"What time's it getting to be?" asked Joe. He reached for his walkie-talkie. "We'd better check in with the command post."

"No reason to hurry," said Hall.

Williams rolled over onto his belly. *Up*. He started counting again. *Down*.

Up.

Down.

"Hey, you can knock it off," Hall said to him. "She's gone."

They all had a good laugh over that.

Lissa walking across the grass: What were they laughing about?

Beyond the glimmering parking lot she glanced over her shoulder at the pergola, blurry without her glasses, bouncing behind her with each step. She shrugged and went on.

She looked down. She slipped her shoes off and felt the warm grass, following her feet past the Library and the new Student Union, staying on the shade. At the far side of the campus she climbed the cool steps to the lab.

"Knock-knock?"

She slid around the open door.

The stink from the tiered cages was overpowering; she knew at once that it would be too much for her.

She heard someone clear his throat. She held her breath, tucked in her top, and walked forward between the skittering enclosures.

"Oh!"

An electric buzz rattled the cages.

The rats scrambled over one another, hundreds and hundreds of rats. She almost screamed. The buzzing stopped. The rats subsided.

A hand, cold and clammy as sweating brass, touched her neck. She stiffened. It seemed to be trying to press her straight down into the floor.

"Ah, but you're not Sherrie, are you." It was a statement. "Apologies."

She was released. She turned. She saw a moist left hand recently relieved of its rubber glove; as she faced it, an acrid fume sliced up her nostrils. Formaldehyde.

She stumbled back. "W'll, hi, Eliot. I was looking for Sharon." She rubbed at her watering eyes. "I was on my way to your apartment, but I thought I'd stop by here first." She looked up into his pallid, implacable face. And shuddered. "You haven't seen her?"

"Afraid not, Lissa."

He simply observed her, waiting.

She wanted out, but she said, "Well, what are you up to in here, anyway? I never saw all these—these *mice* the last time I was here."

He snapped off his right glove and moved to the sink, applied talc. He pocketed his pale hands in his white coat and leaned against a supply cabinet.

"A low voltage is discharged through the bottom of each cage," said Eliot, "every two minutes, twenty-four hours a day. At various stages I remove typical specimens and dissect the adrenal cortex, the thymus, the spleen, the lymph nodes and so forth, and of course the stomach. There is a definite syndrome, you know."

Are you for real? she wondered, drifting to the window. Below, a fat, greasy-looking mama's boy with horn-rimmed glasses gazed up at the window. She had seen him hanging around a number of times lately. Too many times. She stepped away from the window.

"The adrenal cortex," continued Eliot conversationally, "is always enlarged. All the lymphatic structures are shrunken. And there are deep ulcers, usually in the stomach and upper gut."

He's not kidding, she thought. She looked outside again. The young man was gone. She felt relieved. "What do you call it?" she said, almost reflexively.

"A stress rig," said Eliot. Cheerfully, she thought. Then, "Sherrie's probably back at the House by now. Be careful going home, will you? I know I don't need to remind you." When she did not say anything, "About what happened to the others. It was a combination, a choke hold from behind, forearm across the throat, under the chin, one arm in a hammerlock.

Fractures of the larynx, internal hemorrhaging. And this vertebra, this one right here, at the base of the neck. That's what finished them. He had to lift them off their feet. Here." He reached out to show her.

Suddenly, jarringly, the cages buzzed.

Let me out of here! She felt sick.

"Well, I'll see you later, Eliot." She did not wait for an answer.

Outside and down the stairs, a breeze was coming in with the dusk. It's really summer, she thought. She wanted desperately to be at the beach. She could almost smell the Sea & Ski basting her skin. A bird sang high on a telephone wire. O let there always be summers, she thought. A hundred, a thousand of them. That was what she wanted. She wanted there to be a thousand summers.

Joe trod blankly along University Drive. Off duty at last, he was on his way back to the campus, where his wife would be waiting.

"How long has this been happening?" he asked, a little dazed.

"Ed Withers's been paying off Hall to keep him quiet ever since, Lord, seven-eight months," said Old John, strolling with his hands behind his back, his voice low as a moribund bulldog's. "Anyway, Joey"—he had never called him that before—"I figured you ought to know. What I mean to get across is, try to keep to yourself as much as you can while you're here. They're a kind of—oh, they're a bunch of what you would call motivated young officers. Highly motivated."

"What I can't understand," Joe persisted, "is why everyone is keeping his mouth shut."

Old John averted his eyes and took an unexpected number of steps to answer. He fingered his handcuffs nervously; they glinted in the day's dying rays of sunlight. "Job's a job, you know what I mean," muttered Old John.

Joe turned those words over and over as they came to Portola Place.

What in the world did that have to do with it? He stopped at the curb. "What does that have to do with it?" he asked.

But Old John was trekking on down Portola Place. He continued to keep an eye on Joe, however. Joe saw him put a hand behind his ear.

"Nothing," Joe shouted. Nothing at all. "See you Friday."

He shook his head. Even here, he thought. He took a too-deep breath of the lukewarm air, squinting as the setting sun peeped its staring red eye

from between the buildings. He started walking again. He lowered his head and watched his feet move, crossing the street at a fast clip.

So Hall's wife was getting pumped by the Chief of Security. And Chief Withers was being—was there a less melodramatic word for it?—blackmailed by Hall. With a promotion thrown in. Joe throttled a bitter laugh. He wondered whether Hall's wife knew that end of it. And whether she was smugly enjoying the benefits with her husband. What the hell, what the hell, what the hell, Joe thought aimlessly. And heard a rustling in the bushes.

"**W**here's the cook?"

"She's not coming in again till after vacation."

"Well, where's the House Mother?" said Kathy. "I know, I know, there's no House Mother here. Ooh, I wish I was still at PT!"

"Better not let Madam President hear you bitching," said Sharon. "She'll kick you out on your lily-white ass."

Kathy groaned and went upstairs.

Lissa laughed. She had seen the House Mother for the Pi Taus; her face had more lines in it than *War and Peace*, which she had been reading for English 260. Trying to read. Part I had been on *The Six O'Clock Movie* Monday. Dutifully she had watched it, but for some reason she missed Part II. Part III had been on for a few minutes now.

"Henry Fonda's the only one who acts like he read the book," said Sharon, giving up on the color controls and laying her legs over the arms of the couch again. The set, which rendered everything the color of bile, did look, as Sharon had once remarked, "like somebody took a whiz on it." Lissa tried to follow the plot, but by now it made no sense at all to her.

"Who's been leeching my Marlboros, anyway?" said Sharon, digging under the cushions.

Lissa flipped over to Channel 11. "Hey, *Chiller*'s on."

"Right arm," said Sharon.

"Is that *Frank*enstein?"

"Fuck yes," said Sharon. "I've seen this flick so many—"

"You know, I've never seen it all the way through," said Lissa. "My folks would never let me."

"Ha!"

"No, really."

"Well, go ahead, knock yourself out."

Fascinated, Lissa watched the scene in which little Maria so innocently shared her flowers with the Monster on the riverbank. One by delicate one they cast daisies on the water. Then, very slowly, the Monster's expression began to change, as the child ran out of flowers, as the scene began to fade out.

"That's the part they always cut," said Sharon. "You should see his face right after this, before they find her with her neck broken. You know what I think? I don't believe he ever meant to kill her at all. I think he just sort of, you know, crushed her to him. You know what I mean? I don't think there was anything evil about it. They were both innocents. Neither one of them knew anything about it."

A bald-headed used-car salesman appeared on the screen, his face a sneer of chartreuse.

Joe stood stock-still and waited for the next sound.

It did not come.

He stepped onto the blue-shadowed lawn. His hand steadied on his flashlight.

He heard footfalls on the other side of the hedge, close to a house.

He let himself into the foliage, deciding to follow it up. Leaves, small and shiny, tracked past him on either side, hard branches skidding off his head, almost knocking his hat to the ground.

Close to the other side, he saw a man's back moving quickly away from him along the side of the house, toward the front sidewalk. The house was dark, probably empty; he hoped so. He felt disoriented for a fraction of a second, almost as if he were not really here but somewhere else entirely. Then he saw the figure stand straight and slow to a normal gait, crossing under the street lamp. Then the figure returned to a crouch and headed into the trees on the other side. Peeping Tom? Or the one he had been hired to catch? Well, if this is the one, he must be one poor scared son of a bitch right now, even if he doesn't know he's being watched. In fact, Joe realized, his own heart hammering at the back of his badge, that part wouldn't really have anything to do with the feeling, not anything at all.

Joe pulled free of the hedge and backed up. He moved down behind the next four houses in line and then continued forward to the street and crossed at the end of the block. He cut into the alley just past the houses.

He stayed close to the wooden fence, navigating around trash barrels—empty, they would drum an alarm down the whole of Sorority Row.

He heard tennis shoes grinding into the gravel.

A young man crossed the alley not fifty feet in front of him.

They heard Kathy put a record on the turntable upstairs.

The TV screen receded into the deepening shadows of the living room. A cricket started up, sounding so close that Lissa glanced nervously about to see if it was in the house with them. Outside, an elderly officer paced past the hedge, hands behind his back.

"Look at that old codger." Sharon's ash flared and hissed before her face, then arced down. "I'll bet they still don't give them real bullets to use. Yeah, I saw his gun one time. The barrel was plugged up with wood or bubble gum or something. I wonder if they're going to do any good now that we need them? Somebody needs them. The only thing they've been good for so far is to *remind* us all. D'you see what I mean?" She sat forward. "God, I've got to get away from here for a while. I'm starting to vegetate. When's Eliot coming over?"

"He didn't say."

"He always takes his time. I don't know what he does on his way over here, wandering around jacking his brain off with some new pet theory."

"Sharon!"

"Well, it's the truth."

They sat with the sound turned down. The cricket synched with the record for a few bars, then continued on its own again.

"Can I have one of those, please?"

"I didn't know you were smoking now, Lees."

"I'm not. Not really."

The young man crossed the alley.

Joe froze.

Then he followed.

Passing between two houses, he stopped again and dropped to one knee.

He saw ahead to the next street. The young man had already crossed over and was now hesitating by one of the huts on the other side. Houses, he told himself. Now Joe looked between the trees and houses as down a tunnel: as the street lamp flicked on, the pavement mottled under the new light, his eyes focused through to a square of still-bright sky visible now above the long campus parking lot.

He waited.

Another figure, nearly a silhouette, appeared against the sky.

It was a woman.

He snapped to, aware that he had lost track of his prey. The young man was gone. He had slipped through, probably to the lot. But—*had* he gone through, or was he still somewhere on the block between, sidestepping from house to house?

He had blown it.

He started to move anyway.

Then it hit him. The woman. The woman waiting in the lot.

It had to be his wife.

"**E**liot," said Sharon, "is very into it. And therefore out of it. If you know what I mean. There are moments with us. Not many, but there are. You were right, though. Sometimes I do wonder if it's worth it. God, I've been staring into this box too long. Now it's beginning to stare back." She clicked off the TV with her toes. "I don't need to turn on the tube to see rape, murder and perversion. I can get all that right here at school."

Lissa heard a record droning upstairs. It sounded like Dylan.

turn, turn, turn again

"Tell her to turn it over, will you?" said Sharon. "That song's bumming me out."

Lissa felt her way to the top of the first landing.

"Lis-sa? Bring down something to scarf, will you? Um, Screaming Yellow Zonkers. Whatever she's got hidden up there. An-y-thing!"

Lissa smiled.

turn, turn to the rain and the wind

She walked on down the hall.

Joe had squatted so long that his gaze was fixed, almost as if the rectangle of light sky had somehow been looking back down into him instead. His eyes stung.

Fatigue. He hoped. Four days a week had seemed fine at first. Enough time to do some good, maybe, but not enough to—but it was late now, much later than he had thought, judging from the color of the sky. Marlene, he realized, blinking alert, had been waiting—how long? How long had he crouched here? And how long before, at the other village? Block, he reminded himself, block.

He crossed the street, his breath jangling in his ears like dog tags.

He shot a glance at the patch of sky and the dark figure of his wife.

His pace quickened.

As he headed over a lawn, a young man bolted out of the shrubs, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses clattering from his face.

With Ritz crackers and a five-pack of Hydrox cookies in one hand, she drew the knob toward her, cutting the sliver of light from Kathy's room, and made for the stairs.

There was a knock on the front door.

The stairway was an unknown in the dark. She waited.

Finally, "Sharon? Can you get that?"

The knock again.

She descended, pressing against the wall.

"Just a—" She felt a catch in her throat. Why?

The door swung open.

The kid was squirming on the lawn, his face jumping.

"Whatsa matter? I'm on my way home from a study date! Whatsa *matter?"*

Joe closed the cuffs, pressed the key into the notch and set the lock.

Something in the young man's face, swarming in a film of sweat, refused to let Joe relax. He shoved the glasses at him and pulled him to his feet. He glanced ahead. The sky was dark, too dark to see her.

He whipped the antenna up on his walkie-talkie. It shook in his hands, waving back and forth in the night air.

She saw a woman, backlit in the open doorway.

"I'm sorry," said the woman. "But I wonder if you've seen my husband. He was supposed to meet—"

"No, I—" stammered Lissa. "Do you mean he was outside?" Where was Sharon? *Where?* She left the doorway. "Just a minute, okay?"

She felt around the room. "Share?" she called. I know, she thought. She said she was hungry. I'll check the kitchen. If I can only find the light!

"Sha-ron!" she called, and wondered why her voice was breaking.

"We don't want to hurt you," Joe said. "Believe that."

He drew his prisoner through the shrubs, crushing twigs and unseen garden creatures in his path.

He turned up the gain and depressed the call button. He needed back-up. His throat was dry and the back of his tongue hurt.

A shrill electronic sound whined close by. Instantly he recognized it. It was feedback—his own signal being picked up on another receiver.

"I guess you wouldn't know who I mean," the woman said from the doorway. "But he's one of the Security…"

It's so dark, thought Lissa at the door to the kitchen. She forced herself across the chill linoleum, her arms outstretched like antennae.

She beard a sound—a low voice. It was singing:

some folks like t' talk about it

some don't

A wind from nowhere blew through her chest.

He pushed the kid ahead of him, following the sound.

Louder. Joe was relieved. Reinforcements were near.

Then he noticed his prisoner's stare.

At the rear of the last house by the parking lot, dark shapes were moving.

She seemed to swim through darkness past the smooth pulsating refrigerator where there were always tooth marks in the cheese, to the

drawer from which the tools had been quietly disappearing for weeks, clamoring for something, anything with which to protect herself. It was silly, she knew, but—there. A butcher knife.

Joe released his own wrist and locked the kid to the branch of what might have been a rubber tree.

"We'll be back for you, Charlie," he said.

She felt herself drawn down the short stone steps from the kitchen to the storage porch, to the low singing and other voices and what sounded like a scratching close to the screen door that opened into the back yard.

The officer plunges through the shrubbery. At that someone slams out the back door, sees dark forms and the girl held to the dirt and reflexively cocks back an arm, white moons rising on the nails that clench the knife. The officer sees the downed girl, uniforms, another figure lunging into it. There is no time to question, not now while there is still time to stop it before it happens again. He remembers them sitting there dumbly in their baggy pajamas, their wooden bowls empty of the ice cream a few minutes before it happened, and how he had gone away and done nothing, not even when he heard the laughter and the grunting and the automatic fire. And the screams. But not this time. He dodges and grabs the empty hand, wrenching it into a hammerlock as he encircles the waist with his left arm, releasing the wrist with his right and setting his forearm under the chin. The back arches and the legs kick madly, but the hand refuses to let go the knife. Faces turn up. One of the officers stays atop their victim. It is Williams who closes in from the front, spreading his milky palm across the distorted mouth, covering it. "Nice going, Joe." He grins. "Now you one of us, too." Joe does not yet understand. Now he feels a slip in the neck and the body swings like the clapper of a bell in his arms. Now he hears new footsteps behind him and a sudden skull-splitting screech. It is the scream of a woman. He thinks he recognizes it but it is too late, now it really is too late as the girl in his arms swings one last anguished time, as her knife slices at the dark with a flash and he sees a face reflected in the blade for an instant

before it drops into the leaves. But he must know what he has seen. He has seen the face of a killer. It is the same face he has always seen.

The moonlight washes down on them all.

The Scar

This time they were walking a divided highway, the toes of their shoes powdered white with gravel dust. The little girl ran ahead, skipping eagerly along the shoulder, while her mother lagged back to keep pace with the man.

"Mind the trucks," called the woman, barely raising her voice. Soon the girl would be able to take care of herself; that was her hope. She turned to him, showing the good side of her face. "Do you see one yet?"

He lifted his chin and squinted.

She followed his gaze to the other side of the highway. There, squatting in the haze beyond the overpass, was a Weenie Wigwam Fast Food Restaurant.

"Thank God," she said. She thought of the Chinese Smorgasbord, the Beef Bowl, the Thai Take-Out and the many others they had seen already. She added, "This one will be all right, won't it?"

It was the edge of the town, RV dealerships and fleet sales on one side of the road, family diners and budget motels on the other. Overloaded station wagons and moving vans laden with freight hammered the asphalt, bringing thunder to the gray twilight. Without breaking stride the man leaned down to scoop up a handful of gravel, then skimmed stones between the little girl's thin legs and into the ditch; he held onto one last piece, a sharp quartz chip, and deposited it in his jacket pocket.

"Maybe," he said.

"Aren't you sure?"

He did not answer.

"Well," she said, "let's try it. Laura will be hungry, I know."

She hurried to catch the little girl at the crossing. When she turned back, the man was handling an empty beer bottle from the roadside. She looked away. As he moved up to join them, zippering the front of his service jacket, the woman forced a smile, as if she had not seen.

In the parking lot, the man took their hands. A heavy tanker geared down and pounded the curve, bucking and hissing away behind them. As it passed, the driver sounded his horn at the traffic. The sudden blast, so near that it rattled her spine, seemed to release her from a bad dream. She laced

her fingers more securely with his and swung her arm out and back and out again, hardly feeling the weight of his hand between them.

"This is a nice place," she said, already reading a banner for the all-day breakfast special. "I'm glad we waited. Aren't you glad, Laura?"

"Can I ride the horse?" asked the little girl.

The woman looked at the sculpted gray-and-white Indian pinto, its blanket saddle worn down to the fiberglass. There were no other children waiting at the machine. She let go of his hand and dug in her purse for a coin.

"I don't see why not," she said.

The little girl broke away.

He came to a stop, his empty hands opening and closing.

"Just one ride," the woman said quickly. "And then you come right inside, hear?"

On the other side of the glass, couples moved between tables. A few had children, some Laura's age. Families, she thought. She wished that the three of them could go inside together.

Laura's pony began to wobble and pitch. But the man was not watching. He stood there with his chin up, his nostrils flared, like an animal waiting for a sign. His hands continued to flex.

"I'll see about a table," she said when he did not move to open the door.

A moment later she glanced outside and saw him examining a piece of brick that had come loose from the front of the restaurant. He turned it over and over.

The menus came. They sat reading them in a corner booth, under crossed tomahawks. The food items were named in keeping with the native American motif, suggesting that the burgers and the several varieties of hot dogs had been invented by hunters and gatherers. Bleary travelers hunched over creased roadmaps, gulping coffee and estimating mileage, their eyes stark in the chill fluorescent lighting.

"What would you like, Laura?" asked the woman.

"Peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

"Do they have that?"

"And a vanilla milkshake."

The woman sighed.

"And Wampum Pancakes. Papoose-size."

She opened her purse and counted the money. She blinked and looked at the man.

He got up and went over to the silverware station.

"What's he doing?" said the little girl.

"Never mind," said the woman. "His knife and fork must be dirty."

He came back and sat down.

"And Buffalo Fries," said the little girl.

The woman studied him. "Is it still okay?" she asked.

"What?" he said.

She waited, but now he was busy observing the customers. She gave up and returned to the menu. It was difficult for her to choose, not knowing what he would order. "I'll just have a small dinner salad," she said at last.

The others in the restaurant kept to themselves. A man with a sample case ate a piece of pecan pie and scanned the local newspaper. A young couple fed their baby apple juice from a bottle. A take-away order was picked up at the counter, then carried out to a Winnebago. Soft, vaguely familiar music lilted from wall speakers designed to look like tom-toms, muffling the clink of cups and the murmur of private conversations.

"Want to go to the bathroom," said the little girl.

"In a minute, baby," the woman told her. A waitress in an imitation buckskin mini-dress was coming this way.

The little girl squirmed. "Mom*my!"*

The waitress was almost here, carrying a pitcher and glasses of water on a tray.

The woman looked at the man.

Finally he leaned back and opened his hands on the table.

"Could you order for us?" she asked carefully.

He nodded.

In the rest room, she reapplied make-up to one side of her face, then added another layer to be sure. At a certain angle the deformity did not show at all, she told herself. Besides, he had not looked at her, really looked at her in a long time; perhaps he had forgotten. She practiced a smile in the mirror until it was almost natural. She waited for her daughter to finish, then led her back to the dining room.

"Where is he?" said the little girl.

The woman tensed, the smile freezing on her lips. He was not at the table. The food on the placemats was untouched.

"Go sit down," she told the little girl. "Now."

Then she saw him, his jacket with the embroidered patches and the narrow map like a dragon on the back. He was on the far side of the room, under a framed bow and arrow display.

She touched his arm. He turned too swiftly, bending his legs, his feet apart. Then he saw who it was.

"Hi," she said. Her throat was so dry that her voice cracked. "Come on, before your food gets cold."

As she walked him to the table, she was aware of eyes on them.

"I had a bow and arrow," he said. "I could pick a sentry out of a tree at a hundred yards. Just like that. No sound."

She did not know what to say. She never did. She gave him plenty of room before sitting down between him and the little girl. That put her on his other side, so that he would be able to see the bad part of her face. She tried not to think about it.

He had only coffee and a small sandwich. It took him awhile to start on it. Always travel light, he had told her once. She picked at her salad. The people at the other tables stopped looking and resumed their meals.

"Where's my food?" asked the little girl.

"In front of you," said the woman. "Now eat and keep quiet."

"Where's my pancakes?"

"You don't need pancakes."

"I do, too!"

"Hush. You've got enough." Without turning her face the woman said to the man, "How's your sandwich?"

Out of the corner of her eye she noticed that he was hesitating between bites, listening to the sounds of the room. She paused, trying to hear what he heard. There was the music, the undercurrent of voices, the occasional ratcheting of the cash register. The swelling traffic outside. The chink of dishes in the kitchen, as faint as rain on a tin roof. Nothing else.

"Mommy, I didn't get my Buffalo Fries."

"I know, Laura. Next time."

"When?"

She realized she did not know the answer. She felt a tightening in her face and a dull ache in her throat so that she could not eat. Don't let me cry,

she thought. I don't want her to see. This is the best we can do — can't she understand?

Now his head turned toward the kitchen.

From behind the door came distant clatter as plates were stacked, the squeak of wet glasses, the metallic clicking of flatware, the high good humor of unseen cooks and dishwashers. The steel door vibrated on its hinges.

He stopped chewing.

She saw him check the room one more time: the sharply-angled tables, the crisp bills left for tips, the half-eaten dinners hardening into waste, the full bellies and taut belts and bright new clothing, too bright under the harsh fixtures as night fell, shuttering the windows with leaden darkness. Somewhere outside headlights gathered as vehicles jammed the turnoff, stabbing the glass like approaching searchlights.

He put down his sandwich.

The steel door trembled, then swung wide.

A shiny cart rolled into the dining room, pushed by a busboy in a clean white uniform. He said something over his shoulder to the kitchen crew, rapid-fire words in a language she did not understand. The cooks and dishwashers roared back at his joke. She saw the tone of their skin, the stocky, muscular bodies behind the aprons. The door flapped shut. The cart was coming this way.

He spat out a mouthful of food as though afraid that he had been poisoned.

"It's okay," she said. "See? They're Mexicans, that's all…."

He ignored her and reached inside his jacket. She saw the emblems from his Asian tour of duty. But there were also patches from Tegucigalpa and Managua and the fighting that had gone on there. She had never noticed these before. Her eyes went wide.

The busboy came to their booth.

Under the table, the man took something from his pants pocket and set it beside him on the seat. Then he took something else from the other side. Then his fists closed against his knees.

"Can I have a bite?" said the little girl. She started to reach for the uneaten part of his sandwich.

"Laura!" said the woman.

"Well, he doesn't want it, does he?"

The man looked at her. His face was utterly without expression. The woman held her breath.

"Excuse," said the busboy.

The man turned his head back. It seemed to take a very long time. She watched, unable to stop any of this from happening.

When the man did not say anything, the busboy tried to take his plate away.

A fork came up from below, glinted, then arced down in a blur, pinning the brown hand to the table.

The boy cried out and swung wildly with his other hand.

The man reached under his jacket again and brought a beer bottle down on the boy's head. The boy folded, his scalp splitting under the lank black hair and pumping blood. Then the cart and chairs went flying as the man stood and grabbed for the tomahawks on the wall. But they were only plastic. He tossed them aside and went over the table.

A waitress stepped into his path, holding her palms out. Then she was down and he was in the middle of the room. The salesman stood up, long enough to take half a brick in the face. Then the manager and the man with the baby got in the way. A sharp stone came out, and a lockback knife, and then a water pitcher shattered, the fragments carrying gouts of flesh to the floor.

The woman covered her little girl as more bodies fell and the room became red.

He was going for the bow and arrow, she realized.

Sirens screamed, cutting through the clot of traffic. There was not much time. She crossed the parking lot, carrying the little girl toward the Winnebago. A retired couple peered through the windshield, trying to see. The child kicked until the woman had to put her down.

"Go. Get in right now and go with them before — "

"Are you going, too?"

"Baby, I can't. I can't take care of you anymore. It isn't safe. Don't you understand?"

"Want to stay with you!"

"Can we be of assistance?" said the elderly man, rolling his window down.

She knelt and gripped the little girl's arms. "I don't know where to go," she said. "I can't figure it out by myself." She lifted her hair away from the side of her face. "Look at me! I was born this way. No one else would want to help us. But it's not too late for you."

The little girl's eyes overflowed.

The woman pressed the child to her. "Please," she said, "it's not that I want to leave you…"

"We heard noises," said the elderly woman. "What happened?"

Tall legs stepped in front of the camper, blocking the way. "Nothing," said the man. His jacket was torn and spattered. He pulled the woman and the little girl to their feet. "Come on."

He took them around to the back of the lot, then through a break in the fence and into a dark field, as red lights converged on the restaurant. They did not look back. They came to the other side of the field and then they were crossing the frontage road to a maze of residential streets. They turned in a different direction at every corner, a random route that no one would be able to follow. After a mile or so they were out again and back to the divided highway, walking rapidly along in the ditch.

"This isn't the way," said the little girl.

The woman took the little girl's hand and drew her close. They would have to leave their things at the motel and move on again, she knew. Maybe they would catch a ride with one of the truckers on the Interstate, though it was hard to get anyone to stop for three. She did not know where they would sleep this time; there wasn't enough left in her purse for another room.

"Hush, now." She kissed the top of her daughter's head and put an arm around her. "Want me to carry you?"

"I'm not a baby," said the little girl.

"No," said the woman, "you're not…."

They walked on. The night lengthened. After a while the stars came out, cold and impossibly distant.

The Detailer

Paulino was whistling by the time he got to work.

He could not remember the name of the song. It had started running through his head as soon as the alarm went off, and then he heard it in the shower and all through breakfast. When Rosalie asked him why he was so happy he told her he didn't know, but he kept on hearing the song until finally he began to whistle. He had to let it out, like steam.

On the way the streets were jammed and the air was so brown that the sun was only a pale, dirty glint. He kept his window rolled up and tried to think of the words but he could not get the first line.

Ruben was in the driveway of the Palm Vista Car Wash, setting out the *Yes, We're Ready for Your Dirt* sign. He had a blue towel in the pocket of his clean white jumpsuit and an expression on his face that would not give him away. Paulino rolled the window down.

"Little Paulie," said Ruben.

"O Rosalinda — she won, right?"

"Yeah, by a nose."

Paulino grinned and turned up the driveway. He parked his Ford Escort and hurried back to the building, whistling louder than ever. Ruben was inside at the snack machines.

"How much?"

"Twelve-to-one," said Ruben.

"All right!"

"I had forty…"

"And forty for me."

"But, see, I got there late. The race already started. They closed the window."

"No la!"

Ruben fumbled coins into the soda machine, missed the Pepsi button and hit Mr. Pibb instead. "I'll pay you back."

"You don't even have my forty?"

"My kids, they ate a lot of crap. Two-fifty for a hot dog. Plus nachos and Cokes. You know."

Paulino turned away, went to another machine and waited while a paper cup dropped and filled with coffee. He stirred in some creamer, breathing the steam while it cooled. Then he heard the water come on and the

shammies start to move in the car wash tunnel. When he felt the rhythm through the thick soles of his shoes he thought of the song again. He could still make it out over the wet, grinding rhythm.

"Okay, *compá*," he said. "Friday for sure…"

But Ruben was already outside, guiding the first car onto the automated track. It was an Isuzu Rodeo so new it glistened before it got to the jets.

Paulino finished the coffee, punched his time card and put on his jumpsuit.

He saw the Rodeo disappear as the wall of shammies closed over the back end. Then foam spurted as the soap hit the rear tires. The sidewalls were black and gleaming and there was still a dealer card in the license plate holder. This one was not ready to be washed. The paint had not even set. It only needed a dusting to take off the pollution from the air.

But at Palm Vista the customer was king.

He looked around to see who owned it. Several people already had receipts from the glass office. He recognized a half-dozen regulars, businessmen and college students and mothers on their way back from the elementary school, ready to start the week off right.

There was Mrs. McLintock, who took such good care of her old Pontiac that it shone even in the overcast. Jason, the kid with the Cabrio and the UCLA parking permit. And Cheryl, who had a smile to match her bright yellow Beetle. She spent a lot of time at the beach, he knew, because there was always sand in the floor mats. And Mr. Travis, who had just traded up his Camry for an Audi A4. Paulino wondered how he liked it.

He would have to ask.

It cost nothing to make conversation with the customers, and besides, Mr. Travis was his friend. They all were. They called him by name, telling him to be careful about the grocery bags in the back seat and could he make sure to get the rearview mirror because it fogged up last night on the way home and they almost had an accident. When he did these special things for them they tipped him extra, and when they forgot he would talk about something else till they remembered, and if they didn't have any small bills he would tell them to catch him next time and they usually did. It was only fair. He listened to their problems and did his best to make them happy and that was worth something. A clean car gave them another chance at life. They understood that and kept coming back. This morning the sedans and

station wagons and sport utility vehicles were backed up into the alley. They could hardly wait.

A new customer was hanging around the tables, a salesman in a short-sleeved dress shirt and polyester tie with blue and white stripes. He kept checking his watch. That's the one with the Rodeo, Paulino thought. It has to be. He looks like he just started a new job and he's worried sick about making a good impression. Well, you can relax, *vato.* I'm ready to straighten your tie and wash behind your ears and polish your chrome before you go out into the world. Leave it to Paulie.

He picked up his detail kit and walked down to the other end of the tunnel to meet the Rodeo when it came out.

Ruben was inside with Manny and the others, sponging the hubcaps as the vehicle went by, wiping the grille and the door handles till they shone like liquid silver. The next car was moving up behind it, Cheryl's Beetle with the happy face front-end. Paulino watched the Rodeo pass under the hot-wax nozzles, then got into the front seat and steered it over the blacktop to the vacuum hoses.

He set the brake, suctioned the new floor mats and polished the mirror and instrument panel while he waited for the water to drain off the hood. He checked the ashtray, saw a few coins and a paperclip there and slid it back in without disturbing them, then sprayed silicone protectant over the dash and rubbed it to a deep luster. That was an extra. The salesman had only paid for a basic wash and hot wax, but Paulino knew he would appreciate it. Cheryl's car always got the same treatment. She never paid for detailing, either. But if he and Rosalie had a daughter he hoped she would grow up with a smile just like that.

He climbed out of the Rodeo and set to work on the rubber trim before the water spots burned in, and heard music again.

It was not the same song. This time there was a heavy, throbbing bass line, very close by. He glanced up, almost expecting to see a thunderhead on the horizon behind the marquee. The moveable letters spelled out this week's slogan, *No Job's Too Dirty for Us.* Beyond that he saw only the power lines and the signal lights at the corner and the hot disk of the sun about to break through the smog. The pressure in his ears grew stronger.

He looked out at the smear of cars on the street, locked bumper-to-bumper as the traffic inched past. A Buick Regal and a Crown Vic LTD pulled even at the red light, sub-woofers booming, shaking the hoods with

each beat like two hearts at war. The radios drowned out the song in his mind. He turned his back on the street and hunkered down behind the Rodeo, sprayed Armor All on the molded bumper, and wondered why Rosalie never woke up with music in her head.

There was no time for that, she had said in the kitchen, especially not on a Monday. What was wrong with him? Did he think she liked spending all day cleaning other people's houses? The things they left for her were disgusting, things they wouldn't touch themselves, things she had never thought she'd have to touch when she came here, after he had promised her so much. Well, he said, maybe you should go home and visit your family for a week, two weeks, he didn't care, and that was what tore it. When she started crying he did not say anything else. She would not even let him kiss her when he dropped her off.

He finished wiping down the Rodeo.

Ruben was working on the yellow Beetle, Manny had the Audi and Craig was about to start on Mrs. McLintock's cherry Pontiac. She was already opening her purse for a tip that could have been Paulino's. He hoped she and Mr. Travis and Cheryl did not think he was avoiding them. If he had not spent so much time on the Rodeo he would be ready. The line moved forward and two more cars from the alley were about to enter the tunnel.

The salesman checked his watch nervously and shifted his weight in tight brown shoes. Paulino ran his towel over the windows, brushed out the front seat, waved him over and handed him the keys.

The salesman got in without a word.

"Nice car," said Paulino.

The salesman inserted his key.

"You want to be careful with that clear-coat, though. It scratches real easy." Paulino closed the door in slow motion, holding onto it as long as he could. "You put on some sealer and glaze, you won't have to worry."

"It's a lease," said the salesman.

"Yeah, well, just the same, I'd get a full detail. Say every sixty to ninety days. You need it around here."

"Thanks for the advice."

"Hey, no problem. Just ask for Paulie."

The salesman got the message. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a dollar bill before he turned the key.

"I'll think about it."

"I only use Mother's Gold." Paulino winked and showed the man his teeth. "One-hundred-percent pure carnauba. Guaranteed."

The salesman started the engine and drove away.

Paulino saw Craig folding paper money into his pocket and thought, I should get some cards printed up. It wouldn't cost much. Plain white business cards, with my name, and underneath that *The Detailer.* And maybe my phone number, too, so I can make house calls on my day off. Why not?

He picked up his kit.

On the way to the glass office he asked Mrs. McLintock how she was doing today. She beamed as if he were her favorite son. He said hello to Mr. Travis, who told him the A4 was the best car he had ever owned. When he came up behind Cheryl she was digging out some loose change for Manny.

"How's the Vee-Dub?"

"Great! Hi, Paulie. I missed you!"

"You oughta let me get those wheels."

"Well…"

Paulino frowned. "See, they're alloy. All that nitrous from the diesels, it wrecks the aluminum. If you don't do nothing about it, you got a problem. I can put on some Wheel Brite…"

"I'm late for class. Will you be here, um, Thursday?"

"Sure. Any time."

"Cool. See you then!"

She grinned and gave a little wave with her fingers.

At the office he held his kit up so Linda the cashier could see the cans of wax and polish through the glass and shrugged at her. She pointed to the job board and shook her head. No one had signed up for detailing so far, just washes and spray wax.

It was going to be a slow morning.

He took a copy of the *Times* from the counter and went back to see who else was waiting. Mr. Nolan was at the tables, sipping black coffee and eating a donut from the Winchell's on the corner. His Geo Metro had not been hand-waxed all year. Paulino was about to bring him the newspaper, when he spotted a metallic grey Lexus LX420 in the driveway. It had just moved forward from the alley and was next in line.

That would be Mrs. Ellsworth.

He smiled and gave her the high sign.

When there was no response he went to the driveway and stood before the tinted windshield, motioning for her to get out so he could take it the rest of the way. 4SUZIE, said the license plate on the front bumper. He knew whose it was without looking. The vehicle came in once a week like clockwork.

The door opened and a man with dark glasses climbed down.

"Oh," said Paulino. "Morning, Mr. Ellsworth. The usual?"

"Not this time."

"You don't want the wash and hot wax?"

"Give me the works."

Paulino was confused. "You mean a full detail?"

The man nodded and pushed his glasses farther up his nose so that no part of his eyes showed. "Get this baby clean, inside and out."

Paulino had given the Lexus a complete detail only last Monday, when Mrs. Ellsworth brought it in right on schedule. A perfect layer of wax still showed through the mud spatters on the fenders. There was some dirt clinging to the sidewalls that would come off as soon as the spray hit them. But the customer was king.

"It'll take about an hour…"

"I'll wait."

Mr. Ellsworth had never waited around for the detailing. When he first got the Lexus he used to drop it off on Mondays and his wife would drive him the rest of the way to his office in the LS400, but after a while he started taking the sedan so that she could use the sport utility. She brought the LX420 in every week for a wash and one Monday a month for a detail. It was her responsibility now, not his.

"Okay," said Paulino, to be sure he understood. "Wheels, trim, upholstery, hand-wax…"

"Forget the wax."

"Steam-clean the engine?"

Mr. Ellsworth shook his head impatiently. "I don't give a damn. Just make everything look fresh as a daisy. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," said Paulino.

"You'll take care of it for me." The man slipped a hundred-dollar bill out of his wallet. "Won't you."

"Sure, Mr. Ellsworth." Without the hand-wax and steam-clean, that was more than enough. A lot more. Paulino took the bill and started for the

office. "I'll get your change."

"The car, first."

"No problem." It was too early for Paulino to break a large bill. He would take it in to Linda when he finished. "Did you have a nice vacation?"

"What?"

"Triangle Lake."

"How do you know about that?"

"Mrs. Ellsworth…" Paulino faltered. "She said you were going on a trip. For the weekend."

"We didn't go anywhere."

"Oh, too bad. I hear it's really great up there. All those trees and everything. Some other time, huh?"

The man pushed his glasses up his nose again, so hard that his hand trembled.

"There was no trip."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Ellsworth."

Paulino put his kit in the back seat and got behind the wheel.

As he steered the car forward the front wheels made contact with the track and the strips of wet cloth begin to sway from side to side. Then the rollers tripped the sensor and the first nozzles sprayed foam at the tires.

He saw the next line of flaps closing over the Metro ahead of him as the ceiling jets went on. The water was a falling black mist in the tunnel. He felt himself drawn into the darkness, heard the wet ratcheting of the machinery all around and checked to see that the windows were tightly closed, then remembered to get out now before it was too late. Otherwise he would have to ride it out to the end, trapped. This was not Paulino's job. He was the one who finished up after the heavy dirt had been washed away. Let the others take care of that. His work was to make things pretty again, at least the parts that showed. He opened the door and jumped down before the shammies touched the windshield.

He stepped around Manny, heading for the square of daylight at the end of the tunnel.

"Where's Suzie Q?"

"Mrs. Ellsworth?"

"The Body!" said Manny. He had to shout over the hissing water. "The one with the headlights!"

"She didn't come in."

As the sport utility vehicle crept by, Ruben snapped his rag at a crust of dirt on the tailpipe. "Aw, I been waiting all week!"

"Maybe she's sick," said Paulie.

"Or she got a new boyfriend!"

"Too much dick last night!" said Craig.

They laughed.

Paulino made his way through the tunnel and waited for the sport utility to roll off the track. Then he started it up and drove a few feet to the hoses.

He did not like to hear them talk that way. Mrs. Ellsworth had posed for some magazines a few years ago but it stopped when she got married. She was a nice person. She always stood around even in her high heels and talked to him while she waited. They had some good conversations. On the Mondays when he did the detailing he had a chance to learn all about her.

He removed the beads of water with a clean blue towel, then opened the doors and got started with the vacuum.

She probably told him too much. About her marriage, for example. Paulino knew it was not going great. That was easy to understand. Sometimes people want different things. They don't tell each other before they get married and by the time it comes out it's too late. Then they just have to do the best they can and hope everything gets better.

Paulino swiped the vacuum between the seats, heard a flapping sound and stopped. A lot of times candy wrappers got stuck there or pieces of paper too big for the hose. He reached down and caught something between his fingers.

It was a credit card receipt from a gas station.

He laid it on the dashboard and got on his knees so he could see if there were any more. He ran his hand under the springs but did not feel anything. When he got up he lifted the floormat and found a crushed dirt clod, some loose pine needles and another receipt under the edge. This one was a hotel bill. He set it on the dashboard, too.

Mr. Ellsworth wanted a trophy wife, someone he could show off to his business friends. The rest of the time she was supposed to be happy with what she had, which was a lot. But she was a smart woman. She needed a life of her own. That was why they started growing apart. At least Mr. Ellsworth had tried to do something about it. Paulino remembered how happy she was last Monday. She could not stop talking about the weekend

getaway, just the two of them, like a second honeymoon. When he had to cancel she must have been sad.

Paulino saw the address at the top of the hotel bill.

It was from the Doubletree Lodge at Triangle Lake.

The other receipt was from a Union 76 station on Highway 5, just north of L.A.

That was on the way.

If they took the trip, after all, why didn't Mr. Ellsworth want him to know?

Paulino tried to put it out of his mind. It was none of his business. He placed the receipts in the glovebox, then went around to the other side.

As he opened the passenger door he noticed some streaks on the inside of the window. He imagined Mrs. Ellsworth falling asleep last night, on the way home from the lake, with her face against the glass. It looked like she had put her hand there, too, to support her head. He placed his fingers over the streaks.

Then he remembered that there had not been a trip.

That was what Mr. Ellsworth said.

Paulino decided to roll the window down into the door before wiping it. That way the rubber seal would do some of the work for him, like a squeegee. He turned the key and hit the button. But when the window came back up one of her lacquered fingernails came with it, wedged halfway under the seal. And the streaks were worse, with a pink rainbow clinging to them, as if the gears inside the door were wet with strawberry soda.

A faint purple residue came off on his blue towel.

Something had spattered or spilled against the window, a soft drink, maybe. And she had tried to wipe it off and broken her nail. The litter bag under the glovebox held a few crumpled tissues. Paulino emptied it and saw stains on the tissues that had dried to a darker color, like dirty lipstick.

He probed under the seat with the vacuum. As soon as he did that something hard started to rattle. It was not a piece of paper. This time there was a long, pointed object, rounded at one end, stuck between the floormat and the door. He plucked it from the nozzle and looked at it.

One of Mrs. Ellsworth's high heels.

The rubber tip had cut a sharp black line into the mat. The line continued out of the passenger compartment and left a gouge in the paint, just inside the door, before the heel snapped off.

If she was asleep Mr. Ellsworth must have carried her out of the car. But he had not lifted her legs. It was more like he had dragged her. The edge of the mat was curled where her shoe had snagged it.

He pulled on the mat, and the rubberized backing made a sucking sound as it peeled away. The carpet underneath was wet. He dropped the mat on the asphalt and looked at his fingers.

They were red.

Suddenly a breeze came up and blew through the open doors. He felt it in his chest and in his fingers as he waited for them to dry. He tried wiping them on the towel but they were still sticky.

Now there was an emptiness in his stomach, as if he had skipped breakfast and the coffee was ready to pass out of his body in a rush. He wished it were time for lunch but he had hours, long hours, ahead of him. He looked around at the car wash where he worked, where everything was made clean and spotless again and no one had to think about what happened in the world outside. He heard the grinding of the machinery and the hiss of the spray, saw the scum on the water as it ran down to the sewer and the steam rising into the polluted sky, and knew that even this place was not safe anymore.

The street was packed with cars, dirty inside and out, pumping so much filth into the air that the sky might never open again. It was too soon to pick up Rosalie, and if he tried to drive home in the morning rush he could lose his way and be trapped out there forever.

He saw the rest of the crew, wiping and polishing for tips, joking and staying busy so they would not have to look at what was on their towels, as the laundry barrel filled up until it would be too heavy to lift at the end of the day. He saw the customers, reading newspapers and making cell phone calls and staring at nothing, waiting to be born again, fresh and squeaky-clean. And he saw Mr. Ellsworth, watching him.

The man came over and stood next to the mat with its sticky underside turned up.

"What do you want me to do with this?" said Paulino.

"Throw it away."

"Why?"

"I'll get new ones."

"But why?"

"Because they're ruined."

Paulino knew he should not say anything else but could not stop himself. "How's Mrs. Ellsworth?"

The man squinted at him.

"She went away."

"Where?"

"To visit her relatives. She won't be back for a long time." He took out his wallet and handed over another hundred dollar bill. "Here. For the mats."

"We don't have any," said Paulino.

"Get some."

"You have to go to the dealer for that."

"You do it for me." He tried to give him fifty more. "Keep the change."

Paulino got out of the car.

"Where are you going? You're not finished…"

He went over to Ruben, who was working on a Sportage at the end of the ramp.

"I can pay you twenty today," Ruben said.

"Forget about it, *vato.*" Paulino took the first hundred from his pocket and handed him both bills.

"What's this for?"

"The LX420."

"Huh?"

"If you don't want to do it, that's okay with me. Give some to Craig and Manny. And Linda. She works hard, too."

Paulie walked on to his Escort at the back of the lot. He took off his jumpsuit as he went, stepped out of it and left it on the asphalt without breaking stride. Then he got behind the wheel and turned the key.

He pulled into the alley and squeezed past the line of waiting cars, hoping to spot a sidestreet that was clear. On the way to find Rosalie he turned on his radio to block out the traffic noise. The first station he came to was playing power oldies. He raised the volume and began to sing along, not paying attention to the words. After a mile or so he realized it was the same tune he had heard when he woke up this morning, a love song that kept circling back on itself and starting again. *You make me feel so brand-new,* sang Al Green's high, soulful voice. *Let's stay together, whether times are good or bad or happy or sad*….The lyrics sounded so beautiful to

Paulino that his eyes burned. He kept singing along even after the record was over. He did not want it to end.

Home Call

Linda Fowley had been working the field for less than a day when she knew that she was afraid.

The full weight of it took her by surprise. It left her momentarily disoriented, then close to tears, then angry at the numbing inevitability of it all. For she recognized it as the same fear that how blown through her that day near the end of her final trimester at the University, when one more simple précis, in itself no different from any of the hundreds of others she had written, suddenly became too much for her to bear, the detail that would surely reduce her to despair.

Perhaps some part of her had been aware all along that the fear was building again, that it was bound to return. For hadn't it been born of the same stifling balance of determination and futility which now described her work with Social Services?

No, she thought fiercely, *I'm not going to chuck it all in, not this time. I won't!*

After all, it had been easier to drop out then. She hadn't worried about what her professors or the school would think. Why should she? And her friends? They hadn't understood; how lucky for them.

In the ten years since, it had been easy enough to remain withdrawn and anonymous, to keep plugging away at one pointless job after another, simply because there was nothing at stake, no reason she *should* have cared.

But her job with DPSS was different.

This matters, she thought from the beginning, *this means something*. *Because I care what happens to children, I really do. I always have. I know that now*. They, at last, were something truly worthy of her caring. Weren't they? *Yes, yes, they were. Are. Somebody has to care. I do.*

And yet…there was something else, something else.

She tried to put it out of her mind.

So what that the transfer she had requested out of the Hall and into the field was not all that she had expected? That instead of bringing her closer to the children and the source of their problems, it left her even less able to do anything meaningful for them? That the whole morning long most mistrusting foster parents had not even answered the door? That the same battered, neglected, runaway kids would probably be returned again and

again to the county residence facilities, no better off than they had been before she submitted her casework recommendations?

Things would smooth out. She would find the key soon. Of course she would.

She had always known that she might fail. That in itself did not frighten her. Why should it?

And yet she was frightened now.

She was not concerned about her own competence; she never had been.

She was afraid, she realized, that soon, very soon she might no longer be able to make herself care.

And that was truly terrifying.

…And this time, too, there was something else, something more, as well….

She walked around the block three times.

The address was at the other end of Sunset, at the top of one of those steep terrace courts set back from the cliffs above body and fender shops, storefront restaurants, import wholesalers and junk sellers posing as antique dealers.

The house was there, hunched among an uneven line of wood frames angled together back in the twenties or thirties, like the others all shingles and peeling enamel and cracked porches sinking slowly away from the humped sidewalks and deeper into the darkness of eucalyptus and oleander.

But, once she had deduced the house number from the misplaced curb markings and the corroded brass numerals, she was flatly unable to convince herself that anyone had passed in or out of this particular front door in some time. She tried, but it didn't scan: a week's worth of throwaway newspapers and advertising flyers were gathering leaves on the walk, frayed window shades were turning yellow behind the occluded windows, and the shrunken lawn was burning out and succumbing to dandelion and wild grasses between the quietly splintering trees and misshapen bushes that indicated the uncertain boundaries of the lot.

So this is what it means to work in the field, she thought.

At least in the office I got to deal with real human beings with eyes and voices and feelings that could be reached. But here—what am I supposed to

do? Break down doors, scrawl notes, force myself and my questions on people who really and sincerely hate my guts?

Because they do. And why shouldn't they? Who am I to strong-arm my way into their lives, telling them how to budget their assistance checks and cook their meals and clothe their kids? (For the foster children are their kids now, for better or worse, God help them.) Who ever presumed to tell Papa how to raise me after what happened? Of course—and this is the irony—if someone had, I might not be here today, standing on one foot in front of a home (and it is that; with a child inside, now it is a home) with a casebook in one hand and a load of bureaucratic bullshit in the other. A self-canceling circle, she thought. Do they ever think of that down at the Department of Public Social
Services? Do they grasp that if we were somehow able to do our jobs properly, there would be no further need for our services?

And still. They do need us. The children do. If Papa had been counseled, perhaps I wouldn't have to be here today, trying so desperately to atone for something I can't even remember.

The children need whatever help they can get. That much is certainly true.

So. This is what they send me out to do. I'm supposed to care about names, numbers, people who exist only in theory, people I can't even see. How do I go about generating that? Will somebody please tell me?

But I've got to. That's all there is to it. I've got to find a way.

As she walked away from the house, she thought she saw one of the curtains move.

Sure, she told herself.

She climbed into her car at the end of the block and drove back down the hill. She had to crank it for a full minute before the engine caught, but it finally took hold and she was away.

She got back onto Sunset and drove by a school, a closed gas station, a TV repair shop whose dusty picture tubes seemed to follow her as she passed. The radio was full of more of the usual; she clicked it off. She made a right turn and found herself at the edge of Echo Park. The water appeared unnaturally still, and on the far shore a solitary figure hunkered at the bank, fishing with a dropline between the floating debris.

She remembered that she had not yet had a lunch break.

I'm entitled to a full hour, she reminded herself. They can't stop me from taking every last minute of it. Not this time.

She parked on the empty street and picked her way over cool grass. I should have brown-bagged something. Why didn't I? I was too nervous to think last night. She started to sit anyway, but the sound of the nearby freeway rushed in her ears, magnified oddly by the surface of the lake. She brushed herself off and headed toward a small restaurant of indeterminate ethnicity on the other side of Alvarado.

The door was open but, as soon as her eyes adjusted, she saw that there were no other customers inside. She slid into a booth and waited for a menu. No one came. I could use something to drink, she thought. She drummed her fingernails on the table, then stopped herself and listened. She believed she heard distant voices, but there was no one behind her, only the walls. Before anyone could appear out of the shadows, she stood again quickly and left the restaurant.

Crossing the street, she spotted another restaurant with a fast-food window attached. She squinted as she drew near, but could not read the takeout list behind the counter. Gang writing crosshatched the glass like webbing.

As she came up, a Latino boy watched her from inside.

"I don't suppose you serve margaritas out here, do you?" she asked, gesturing at the adjacent restaurant. "Or beer?"

He regarded her blankly.

Well, it was worth a try, she thought. I could use one right now, though. Or two. She smiled. It was a joke, see? A— she noticed that the restaurant section was closed.

He looked back impatiently.

For some reason it seemed important to make herself understood to this boy. She tried again to read the overhead menu, but it was no use.

"Can you just make me a hamburger, then?" Did he understand? "Hamburger? You know, a plain old American—"

He shrugged disinterestedly and began scraping the grill.

She went to the table.

Was he laughing at her? It didn't matter. Why should it? She plopped her casebook down in front of her.

My God, she thought, I actually brought it with me. Why? She opened it while she waited, closed it, opened it again listlessly, and stared at the run-

down street and the scrawny palm trees sagging high above the deserted park. As she watched, a rented two-passenger pedal boat drifted slowly in her direction across the lake. From where she sat, there was no one visible behind the wheel.

She considered the open file inside her binder. The sixth visitation of the morning, the one she had just made. Tried to make. The way things were going, it might be the last call of the day. The old house above Sunset. I can't just write this one off, too, she thought. I don't really care what they think back at the office. If I have to, I can even fake an interview report. How would they ever know? But I can't keep going like this without accomplishing anything, I just can't.

She flipped through the rest of her new caseload. There were several more, including the X'd file. Why bother to count? At least she wouldn't have to worry about that one. It had been canceled last week, she'd been told at the last minute, and handed her by mistake as part of the stack. She was supposed to have dropped it back at the front desk before going out. The others were in Pasadena, Highland Park, Eagle Rock, wherever that was. All the way back across town, she guessed.

No.

It stops here. Starts here, rather. I'm going to make my stand before this goes any further. I'm going to get through somehow, no matter what. I've got to.

Anger welled up in her again at the predicament in which she had been placed. Or in which she had placed herself. No, she thought, they didn't have to give me the old shit-list of hardcases, not on my first day out. Did they really have to do that little thing? Is that the way their petty minds work? You know what this is like? Hell Week in a college sorority. I thought this was supposed to be about something more important than staff mindgames. I thought that.

She rose and went to the phone booth at the curb.

I'll call in and tell them what I think. I'll tell them that they're not going to break me, not here, not yet. I'll tell them that I got in to see Mr. and Mrs. —what was the name? Wintersole. On Alta Vista Way. That's right, the one above Sunset. One foster child: Billings, Billy, age ten. Sure, I got in. We had a nice, long talk. Anybody else you want me to see today? Yes, this is me. Linda Fowley. Fowley, Linda. What's that? You're surprised? Oh, it was nothing, really….

The telephone wouldn't work.

The receiver smelled of hair tonic. She held it away from her face and read the directions on the coin box. IF NO DIAL TONE—it was impossible to make out the rest of the words through the gang writing.

She tried a quarter. It didn't come back. So what? I don't need to talk to them. I don't need their sadistic advice.

The phone booth floor now began to exude an odor very much like something dead. She clattered the door back.

Her hamburger was up.

She held it between two fingers as she reread the previous caseworker's report on Billings, Billy, age ten. Almost eleven now, she noted by the date. Brought in by the

Sheriff's Department. No known relatives, last place of residence, Santa Mara,
California. After the usual court proceedings, he had been placed with the Wintersoles. Mid-forties, childless, own their own home. A nice couple, she thought. I like them already. Or do I? With a house like that…but they're probably doing the best they can; they're trying. That's what counts.

She stopped reading and took a good look at what was at the ends of her fingers. It tasted like—what? Like something she had put in her mouth once but forced herself to forget. The meat had been fried in the same oil used to cook something that wasn't on any menu she'd ever seen. She screwed up her face and tossed it in the trash can.

The fry cook was watching her as she recrossed the street to her car.

She found her way back to Alta Vista. On her car radio, the all-news stations continued to rehash the details of a particularly revolting murder. She shuddered, twisted it off and started her ascent up the narrow street.

After a few feet, the car stalled. She ground the starter, but almost immediately it wound down and stopped for good. I should have been paying attention and downshifted on the turn, she thought. She kept trying the key, but it only clicked. The battery was dead.

Right, she thought.

Her lips drew back tightly as she set the wheels into the curb and yanked the hand brake. It's going to take more than this, she told herself.

The street ahead was sharp and winding, the sidewalk broken and shrouded with untrimmed trees. She sighed. She did remember seeing some steps, didn't she?

She returned to Sunset and, just around the corner, located an old concrete stairway that led from sidewalk level to the clifftop and the courtyards above. Without hesitating she took a deep breath, hefted her casebook and started climbing.

A hundred steps later, she paused and lifted her eyes hopefully. She was no more than halfway to the top, though it was hard to be sure from her position. The tiered landings were foreshortened dramatically at this angle. Far below her, cars like toy models swished between the trees. She could see the whole of the school from here. It was abandoned now, the hurricane fence chained shut to protect the perimeters of the gray cement yard, which was intersected with the worn lines of diagramed game fields where no one would be allowed to play until it was unlocked at the end of the summer. She leaned against the landing and opened her book.

A Probation Department gram was clipped to the progress report. She hadn't noticed it before. She read it carefully in preparation, then reread it.

Billings, Billy had run away from home—from his foster home—last week, on the fifteenth. According to the update, he had been returned to the Hall pending a new hearing and follow-up investigation. Telephone contact unsuccessful, etc.

Maybe they're not so nice, she thought. That must be what I'm here to find out.

When her breath had returned, she resumed climbing.

The house looked different from this side. Older, more weathered. A rusted lawn mower propped in the yard collected spiders. She stumbled to the porch and shakily thumbed the bell. Did it work? How could she tell?

The screen frame creaked, the dusty mesh flopping like a breathing diaphragm. She knocked. The warped front door felt as if it might buckle and fold under her knuckles. She leaned over and rubbed out a spot on the window, but only blackness showed beyond the saw-toothed edges of the tattered shade. Her fingertips came away from the glass coated with sharp-edged particles of soot and grime.

Maybe they no longer use this part of the house.

A passageway next to the porch led through tall weeds and hanging branches and nettled shrubs that pricked at her hair and skin. As she emerged at the rear of the house, she was painfully aware of a stinging at her scalpline and scratches on both of her hands.

"Hel-lo? Is anybody home? I only want to—"

The back doorknob moved in her hand.

She pushed. It was unlocked. She pressed her face to the crack and peered in at a widening view of the kitchen.

There was a scurrying inside.

"Well, praise the Lord," she muttered. Somebody's here, after all. "Mrs. Wintersole? May I come in?"

She swung the door open and entered the service porch.

Something slipped out of the kitchen.

Now I've frightened her, she thought. I didn't mean to. I'd better explain fast. There's no turning back now.

She shifted her weight uneasily and considered the kitchen. It was not quite right, somehow. It was not that it looked unlived in. Not exactly. Perhaps for a few days. The air was close and stale. She stepped onto the linoleum and swept the room with her eyes. Cupboards, refrigerator, doorway…

"Mrs. Wintersole? May I please speak with you for a moment? I'm sorry to intrude on you like this. It's about Billy."

… Doorway to the next room. (No one there. Hiding, probably. Should I go in?)
Range, counter, sink. (Yes, that part was right. There. A jar of peanut butter, unlidded, two kinds of jelly, sloppy flatware sticky on the drainboard. So somebody is living here, after a fashion.) Wait a minute. Back up. Sink. (Jammed with dishes, cloudy water, something green growing there. Yuck.) Counter. (Tiles. Steak knife rack. Pot holders.) Range. (Spice bottles.) Doorway…

Something. What? What was it?

She tapped on the wall to the other room.

In front of her, a figure jumped into the doorway.

She gasped. "Oh! I'm sorry. I—"

"What do you want?"

A boy of ten or eleven. He gripped both sides of the door jamb and rocked toward her.

She backstepped. "I just wanted to see your—Mrs. Wintersole. Isn't that her name?" Of course it was. "I mean—"

"You can't go in there."

He glared at her.

I don't blame him. So this is Billy. He must have run away from the Hall. AWOL'd and come straight back here. Naturally. It was his home now, wasn't it? Whatever the problems with his new parents, he had worked them out in his head and come back on his own. Well, good for him, she thought. The Hall is no place to grow up. This is better, much better, in spite of everything; this is real life; this is where he belongs. He finally accepted that and came back.

He must have slipped away within the last few hours. I wonder if they've noticed yet? Apparently not as of this morning. I'll have to call in and tell them. I'm sure the Juvenile Court will accept his voluntary return to his placement home. Case closed. It's so much better this way. He knows where he wants to be. You can't argue with that. I can't.

"Is she here now? I should talk to her. Just for a minute. And then I'll be on my way. I'm glad to see that you're all right, by the way."

He watched her suspiciously. "Who are you?"

She backed to a chair. Why did his question throw her? It was simple enough. "Do you mind if I—let's sit down, okay? I won't bite. I promise." She tried a smile.

The boy seemed relieved. He sat across from her. She pretended to busy herself with her files.

"You're not the cops, are you."

"I'm Miss Fowley. You can call me Linda. No, I'm not the police," she added, though he sounded as if he knew the answer. "I'm one of those people whose job it is to help kids. Like you. Do you understand?"

"I don't need you."

No, she thought, I guess you don't think you do. Still, his remark pierced her. I can try, if you'll only let me. Because it's all I have.

"Let's see. You're eleven now, isn't that right?"

"Twelve."

She clamped on a grin. Let him have that much. A year means a lot at his age. "Is your mother here?"

"My mother's dead."

"I—I know." She searched for details in his file. "I meant your foster mother."

He frowned at her strangely. "You better go now. Otherwise…"

He let it trail off. He's beginning to like me, I'm sure. But he's fighting it. I've got to show him that I don't mean him any harm. I so want him to trust

me.

"Do you expect to see her soon?"

"No."

He continued to look at her peculiarly.

"I don't mind waiting, if you don't. It's part of my job. There's nothing wrong, believe me." Was there? "You don't mind waiting, do you?"

He didn't say anything to that. He fingered his hair away from his forehead and gazed through the doorway into the living room. His face was dirty. Like the kitchen. I'm supposed to make a note about hygiene, she thought. And the living room so dark, even at this time of day, with the shades drawn tight. She's probably not much of a housekeeper. But what did it matter? I won't mention it in my report. He's at home here. Though he does seem a bit ill-at-ease. Well, he hasn't been back that long. Plus I'm here.

"You don't want to see her," he said.

"What about Mr. Wintersole? Is he at work now?"

"No." He sounded genuinely surprised.

Now there was a ticking in the kitchen. Somewhere a lonely dog was barking defensively, and a big car, a Cadillac or limousine, passed in slow dignity on the street outside.

She drummed her fingernails awkwardly on the table.

"Look, I have an idea. Suppose you tell me what you did today? What you're going to do when I leave? Or tomorrow? What are you going to do tomorrow, for instance? What do you do for fun?"

"I don't have much fun. I'm waiting to hear from my friend."

That's good, she thought. "Your friend?"

His throat contracted, his voice strained. "You know."

"No, I don't. Why don't you tell me? I'm interested. Is he coming over to play later?"

"Can't. He's locked up. But he'll get away when he's out on a field trip, or write a letter. We have a code. And I'll tell him it's all clear, and he'll split and come back. Then I don't know. Go off somewhere together, I guess."

Locked up. Field trip. She was getting a feeling. "Is this friend of yours in the Hall, by any chance?"

He turned to her curiously. "How did you know?"

"I thought you might have met some new friends in there. Most kids do. It's not so bad when you have a buddy. They're good to have. They make

things easier, don't they? He'll remember, you'll see. Friends are like that."

"Yeah, they are. I didn't think grownups knew about it," he said wonderingly. "But I didn't meet him there. We knew each other from before."

"From where? Let's see." She sorted through the pages. "Santa Mara, right? Did you know him there?" How nice, she thought. Some sort of continuity, even though he couldn't have been very happy in that other town. *No known relatives*. I'd better not probe too deeply. Who knows what —

"It wasn't very nice there. So we made a plan. He helps me, I help him. We did that, and we left. They picked us up when we got to L.A. We still have our deal. He does his part, I do mine. He did his last week. After, he got scared and ran. I did my part, too. That's what I have to tell him. So he'll know it's okay to come back. Then, I don't know what we'll do. Go someplace together, I guess."

"Why don't I tell him for you? I'll pass by the Hall on my way home."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course I would. But first, wouldn't you like to tell me more about your 'deal'? I'll write it down exactly, I won't change a word. And then the Counselors at the Hall, why, they'll be able to understand your friend better, and help him."

"They can't help."

"Sure they can! Most of them are just like me," she lied. "They *want* to help. Only it's not easy to do the right thing sometimes, if we don't understand. You have to explain it to us. You can really help. That's not so hard, is it? Otherwise—"

"Grownups don't want to help. They want to hurt. They know how, too. They beat us, lock us in—they never tell on each other, either. It's like they have a club. Well, we have our own club now, too. Billy and Chris. There's going to be a lot more members, as soon as other kids find out."

Tears blurred her eyes, tore at her throat and burned her nose. She couldn't speak.

"You better go now," said the boy.

"I—I thought we made a bargain," she said with difficulty. Please, she thought. Let the helping start here, not stop. The world is such an indifferent place, especially for the young. I can't make myself go on with it like this. I care enough to do something about it, I do.

"What?"

"We made a deal ourselves, you and me, remember? You tell me, and I'll tell th-the other grownups. We'll get together and do something about it, I promise."

"You're just like my mother," he said icily. "She always cried first, and then she'd hurt me. It's too late now."

Like my mother, too, she thought. I wanted to lash out. And I did, finally, one last, terrible time. I wonder if Papa knew? He never spoke of it, not when they came to carry her away, not to me, not ever. Perhaps he should have. So that I could have explained how it was and why it happened, why I did it. And then he could have understood. He could have loved me. I wonder if he did, afterwards? He never told me. I must have been the needle of his heart. It was too late for us. But it's not too late now for Billy and his friend Chris and the others, so many others. It can't be, not yet.

She lowered her eyes and jabbed at the folder with her pen.

"I'll be coming back to see you very soon," she managed. Her lips wouldn't work right. "You and your new mother and father. You'll see. I'm sure they're very nice people. If they're not—"

He was laughing. "You don't know anything, do you, lady?" His lips pulled back, baring his stained teeth.

She got up helplessly and turned her shoulders away from him.

I have to be alone for a while. Call in first. I have to tell them. Do it later. But I must call for a tow truck, at least. The Automobile Club. Where is the phone?

She hurried blindly into the living room.

She heard him jerk to his feet, heard his frantic voice. It's too late, a voice inside her was saying. It was always too late. *No, it's not. It's not!*

The telephone was perched on a stand in the hallway. She clacked the receiver from the cradle and brought it to her cheek. In the abnormally dim and quiet house the brittle hum of the dial tone was unnervingly shrill and insistent. Like the car radio and the news headlines on TV which she had tried not to let herself hear, the story about the double murder of a middle-aged couple not two blocks from here.

She shot a glance from the hall across the living room to the sliver of the kitchen doorway, thinking: *The X'd file. That was what it was about. I couldn't help reading part of it, the other home call that was to have been in*

this neighborhood, canceled and reassigned to the LAPD, because the foster parents had both been killed. And the placement child, a little boy, still wandering at large. What was his name? Was it—

She saw only a slender portion of the kitchen from here, but it was enough to reveal to her at last what there was about the room that had seemed slightly askew, so barely out-of-place that she had not consciously noticed. But she noticed now.

She saw the gas range and a part of the wall paneling above it, the part where the knife rack hung. In reality it was more than a steak knife set. There were two knives missing from one end. They would have been the longest. And there were only table knives by the sink. And now, at this moment, she saw that the blank space had grown larger, a broad space on the rack where more than two were missing, a gap wide enough to finally catch her eye and hold it.

She snapped her head aside, her eyes wide in the darkness. She pressed the cradle again and again, but the operator did not come on the line.

A few inches in front of her, a door. She huddled deeper into the recesses of the hall. As she brushed against it, the door began to open.

She reached behind her and jiggled the phone as she squinted into the shadows. A bedroom. The bed unmade. His? No, wait, a king-size bed, a pile of clothes on it. No, it was a person, asleep on one side, faced away from her. And something more. A second sleeping form lay next to it, rolled against the wall. Mr. and Mrs. Wintersole, she thought, shocked. I'm sorry, I —

Her eyes cleared.

They were not sleeping. There were two curved butcher knives embedded in the middle of their backs.

She put the backs of her hands to her mouth, tasting the blood from the scratches on them.

Footsteps behind her, small, quick, furtive steps.

She turned. Started to turn. It's them, she thought, it's his — no, don't let him see! Protect him. You can do it. Say it. Say it now, let it out, all of it, after so long —

"Let me help you! Billy, I love you, I do! Somebody does! It's going to be all right, just let me help you, please, for the love of God don't reject —"

She completed her turn. He was standing there in the hall behind her, arched high on his toes, an unleashed fury contorting his face.

"My name's not Billy," he spat, an unspeakable vengeance convulsing his voice. "I told you not to go in here, but you wouldn't listen. Don't you get it? Billy's the one who lived here. I used to live two blocks away. My name's Chris. Remember it!"

His arms arced in the half-light, holding for an instant before they came down. In his fists were two more blades, a honed, serrated steak knife and a skewer. Their tips caught the remaining light as he plunged them down and away from him, pointing them with perfect, practiced precision into her chest.

Red Dog Down

The boy did not go inside when he heard the mother calling. Instead he waited at the end of the alley and finished his popsicle while two men walked through every yard to the street and back again. Finally they put the leash and wire loop back into the truck. One of them spoke into a CB radio, uncoiling the cord from the dashboard like a black snake. The other wrote something on a clipboard and started the engine. They were about to leave when they saw the boy still standing there between the trash cans and the fence.

"Hey," said the driver. "You sure you don't know where he is?"

The boy sucked his popsicle stick.

"Which way?" said the other man.

The boy pointed to the intersection at the end of the alley and the streets and tract houses on the other side, across the busy boulevard.

"Well, give this to your mom. Tell her to call us if he comes back."

The boy took a card from the driver's hand.

"And bring in those papers," said the other one.

"See, he doesn't have a license. If she can find the papers…"

"The rabies certificate."

"Did he have his shots?"

The boy shrugged.

"She can fax it. The number's right there. Do you know what a fax is?"

"Come on," said the other one. "We got two more calls."

"You be a good boy. We don't want to hurt your doggie. But we have to see him, okay?"

The boy nodded.

The truck drove away.

Two cars were parked in the driveway now. He threw away his popsicle stick before he opened the kitchen door but the mother turned around from the cutting board and grabbed him.

"Are you deaf or something? Answer me!"

The knife waved in front of his face.

"Just like your dad!"

In the living room, his father sat on one end of the couch, squeezing his hands together so hard that the knuckles were white. Two women leaned against the cushions at the other end. The older one crossed herself when she saw him. His father stood up.

"Hey, Little Mike. Did they find him?"

The boy shook his head.

The father smiled.

The boy ran to him and put his arms around his waist.

"Give Gramma a kiss," said the older woman.

"Go on."

The boy clung to him and buried his face.

"He's all tired out," said the man, stroking his head.

"He's lucky to be alive," said the older woman.

"Oh, Cecilia…"

"All this time, right here in the house!"

The man tried to laugh but his mouth twisted crookedly. "Old Red wouldn't hurt anybody."

"Only Loretta!"

"We don't know that for sure."

"Tell it to Linda!" Her hands began to tremble and she turned to the younger woman. "Isabel!"

"Huh?"

"Go set the table."

The young woman blinked thickly. "Linda did it already."

"Then help your sister with the cooking."

"She's done."

"I said go!"

The young woman sighed and worked her large body forward on the cushions, got to her feet and started slowly for the kitchen.

"You hungry, champ?" the man said.

The boy shrugged.

"What's that, orange soda?" He winked, took a handkerchief from the back pocket of his work pants and wiped the color off the boy's mouth. "Better not tell Mom."

"Lucky to be alive," the older woman said again.

In the dining room, the mother set down a serving dish with a loud thump.

"Manny, you didn't change your clothes!"

He walked the boy to the hall.

"Come on, champ," he said. "Let's wash our hands."

He helped the boy with the big dish, scooping out an enchilada for him, and passed it to Isabel, who took two.

"The meat isn't very good," his wife said. "Nobody has to eat it if they don't want to."

He made the twisted smile again. "What do you mean? I just brought it home."

"From work," she said.

"I took it off the truck this morning. Fresh-ground."

"Frozen. They don't use fresh."

"We get our meat shipped in from Colorado." He put his fork down. "It's inspected. USDA Select."

His wife shot a glance across the table at her mother. "Not Choice."

"They don't *have* Choice anymore. All the Feed Bags, they get the best, before Ralph's or Stater Brothers. It costs me plenty."

"Not you. The company."

"It comes off my books!"

She ignored him and spoke to her sister. "Isabel, do me a favor, okay? Don't marry no swing-shift manager."

"You know how many tons we use? If the burgers are no good, everybody goes someplace else. How come we beat McDonald's last week?"

"Get yourself a man with a good job. My first husband, he worked for the county."

The older woman crossed herself. "Rest his soul."

"That way you can have a future."

"I told you," the man explained, "when I buy my own franchise—"

"If you get the loan."

The man stood up. Then he sat down. Then he tried to help the boy cut his food but his hands slipped, as the doorbell rang.

His wife started for the living room.

The little boy stared up at him.

"Don't worry, champ," he whispered.

When she came back her mother said, "Did they get him?"

"I don't need no Animal Control! If I knew where he keeps the gun, I would've shot it myself!"

"I know you would," he said.

"So where is it?" said his wife.

"Safe."

He looked past her. A man with a long grey ponytail stood in the living room, shifting his weight.

"Hey, Vincent."

"Isabel," said the mother-in-law, "set another place."

"I don't want to bother you folks. How's your little girl?"

"No broken bones," said the wife.

The boy's father got up from the table.

"Let's go outside, Vincent. I'm finished, anyway."

"Go on," she said. "I have to fix a plate for Loretta. She can't even come to the table!"

The two men went out onto the porch.

"Is it safe?"

Vincent looked away down the block and tried to speak without moving his lips. "In the garage."

"I'll be over."

"When?"

"Later."

Manny walked to the wrought-iron fence around his small front yard. He gazed through the bars as a pickup truck with a lawn mower and leaf blower in the back rattled to a stop at the house across the street, coming home. The house had the same kind of security fence as every other one on the block. They all looked exactly like his, except for the color.

His friend came up next to him and leaned his arms between the spikes.

"So what did the bank say?"

Manny let out a deep breath. "No way."

"Are you shitting me?"

"I have to pay down some debt first. It's the numbers. We owe too much."

"Did you tell her?"

"Not yet."

The sound of traffic from the intersection became a dull roar.

"Well, at least Loretta's okay. Right?"

"Yeah. The doctor came out."

"What did he say?"

"When I got here, he already left. She's supposed to bring her in tomorrow."

"I can drive you to work in the morning."

Manny shook his head. "She won't go."

"You got medical, right?"

"That's not why. They'd have to take pictures and make a report. She don't want that."

Vincent gazed with him along the block. "Oh. I get it."

"Me, too."

"What about the guys from the pound?"

"They'll be back."

"Maybe not."

"They have to do their job," said Manny.

"Well, he had his shots."

"That don't mean nothing. She filed a complaint. So they have to put him away."

"Oh. That's tough."

"Yeah."

"You had Red a long time."

"Ten years."

"Before you married Linda, even."

"It was Mary's dog, before she ran off. The boy can't even remember her. But old Red was always there. Little Mike, he loves him."

"Shit," said Vincent. "You should get him out of here."

"And go where?"

The sun turned the sky yellow-orange, like the reflected light of a fire somewhere in the city. It seemed to be getting closer.

"I hear that," said Vincent. "So what are you gonna do?"

Manny squinted through the bars at the setting sun.

"Something."

Inside, his wife cut a piece of steak and put it on the extra plate, along with vegetables and a fresh-baked sugar cookie.

"Did you lock the screen door?" she said when he came back. "I don't want that damn dog coming in."

"He's not a damn dog."

"He was always outside. But not today!"

"I was at work."

"Oh, it's really worth it! Look at this place!"

She carried a tray into the hall.

"I thought you had a signal," said the older woman.

"We did," said Manny, clearing the dishes from the table. "I had to lock him in the kitchen. Then I'd say 'Red dog out' so Loretta could come in the room."

"I don't see why you kept that dog if it bites."

"It doesn't, Cecilia. Trust me."

"Oh no?"

"Only strangers."

"Tell it to the doctor."

"He doesn't know what happened. He wasn't here, either."

He took the dishes into the kitchen. She had already thrown out the dog's food and water bowl. He stood there looking down at the place where they had been by the back door. Then he scraped the plates into the garbage can, except for the rest of Loretta's steak. It had a lot of meat left on the bone. He started to put it away when the little boy came into the kitchen.

"You get enough to eat, champ?"

The boy looked up at him with big eyes and reached for the leash. It was still hanging on the wall.

"Not tonight. I'll go out and look again. All right?"

In the living room, Isabel had the TV on. She was eating sugar cookies and watching a cartoon show, staring at the screen as if she were a child herself. Her mother spoke up as he passed through.

"Linda says he bit Mike one time, too."

"I know what Linda says."

"Oh, my daughter is a liar?"

"Just leave it alone, all right? You weren't here. Were you?"

The boy followed him into the hall, holding the leash.

"I told you," Manny said at the bedroom door, "you can't go with me, champ. Not this time."

The boy went back down the hall, dragging the leash. He started to go to the living room, then heard the mother running water in the bathroom sink. He ducked into the other bedroom.

Loretta lay on one of the beds, watching a small portable TV. She had her drawing paper and colored markers and stuffed animals spread out around her.

"Mikey, come here."

He sidled over to her bed.

"Wanna watch *PowerPuff Girls?"*

He picked up a marker, hunched over the paper and began drawing.

"It's *so-o-o* good," she told him. "Blossom, she has to fight all the monsters. She put her ice-breath on that old monkey. He can't hurt her, 'cause girls have powers."

He concentrated on his picture, filling in the scratchy lines till the color was hard and shiny.

She leaned over to see what he was drawing.

"Red," she said and giggled. "You didn't do it right. Here. *Ow!"*

When she reached for the marker she made a face and rubbed her arm.

He looked up from the paper and stared at her shoulder.

She pulled her pajama top off one arm and lifted the gauze bandage to show him. The skin was not broken but there were yellow and black marks, the colors of a bad bruise.

They heard her mother flush the toilet in the bathroom.

The girl froze, then looked at the plate on the TV tray. The vegetables were untouched.

"Mikey, help me." She held out the plate. *"Please?"*

The boy stashed the leash under his bed, came back, picked up the fork and filled his mouth, chewing fast.

Her mother opened the bedroom door.

He put the fork down quickly.

"That's not your steak," she said. "It's Loretta's."

She clicked the door shut and yanked him into the middle of the floor, almost hard enough to dislocate his thin arm from the shoulder.

"Mama, don't!" said the little girl, gobbling vegetables. "I'm eating, see?"

He got away and ran to the other side of his bed, rubbing his arm. He did not cry. There were red finger marks on his arm but no bruises yet.

Manny changed his shoes and reached into the back of the closet for an old windbreaker, folded and hidden carefully behind the rest of his clothes. He put on the jacket and zipped it up.

In the hall, his wife closed the door to the children's room.

"Where are you going now?"

"For a walk."

"Why?"

"I always go after dinner."

"You can't find him," she said. "The Animal Control people already did."

"Oh yeah?"

"Well, they will, in the morning. There's nothing you can do about it. A dog that bites somebody, they have to put him to sleep."

He touched the pocket of his jacket. "We'll see."

"What does *that* mean?"

He brushed past her to the living room and out the front door.

The sky was red now beyond the rooftops. Across the street, other families got up from dinner as the pale colors of television screens flickered on in their front rooms.

He opened the gate and went down the sidewalk to another house on this side, opened the gate there and followed the driveway to a garage door in back. He lifted it far enough to slip under, lowered it and pulled the light bulb cord.

"Hi, boy."

A dog jumped up and ran to him but only got partway before the rope stopped it. He unhooked the rope from the collar.

"How you been? Okay?"

The dog sniffed him and tried to leap up but its legs were not strong enough. He caught it in his arms. It was a short-legged cattle dog/Jack Russell mix with smudged reddish-brown spots showing through the coarse white coat. The dog braced its paws against his chest and licked his face, even the eyes, cleaning them frantically.

The garage door rolled up.

"Did he bark?" asked Manny.

The neighbor pulled the door down. "Only for a minute, when you left. He thinks you're God."

"That's the way they are, red-tick heelers. Real loyal."

When the other man crossed the garage the dog bristled and growled.

"I don't know why he doesn't like me," Vincent said. "After all these years."

"You're a stranger."

"No, I'm not."

"Stay there."

"He won't bite."

"I know. But he doesn't see very good. He can still smell, though. Look. I want to show you something."

Manny set the dog down and stroked its head. He knelt and talked to it as though having an intimate conversation. Then he reached his arm back and waved the other man forward one step at a time.

"That's Vincent," he said to the dog. "You know him, don't you, boy? He's a friend." He snapped his fingers behind his back. "Give me your hand."

"What?"

"Real slow."

The neighbor extended his arm and Manny took hold of the wrist, still petting the dog with his other hand. He held out Vincent's fingers for the dog to sniff. Then he moved them to the top of his own head.

"Friend," said Manny.

He put the fingers in front of the dog's snout, then back to his own head, and finally used Vincent's hand to pet the dog. He repeated this routine until the dog accepted the other man's hand and licked it.

"There. Now he knows you."

"He always knew me."

"Not this way. These kind of dogs, they need to bond with their pack."

"Did you do that for her girl?"

"Sure. They used to roll around all day, just like Little Mike. Red wouldn't hurt them. He can't, 'cause they're part of his pack. Sometimes I didn't even lock up at night. Nobody could walk in or he'd kill them. But only if they were a stranger."

"Then why did you keep him out?"

"Linda doesn't believe me. She never did."

"Good boy," said Vincent, scratching the dog behind the ears. "So what happens when the guys from the pound come back?"

"What do you think?"

"Oh. So they really do have to put him down."

"You got it."

"That sure is tough."

"Yeah."

"Where you gonna take him? He can't stay here."

"I know." Manny felt in the pocket of his trousers. "Leave us alone for a minute, okay? I got something for him."

"Sure."

Vincent went to the garage door and let himself out.

Manny took the rest of the steak from his trouser pocket. The dog got the scent right away and went to work.

"That's the way, Old Red," he said, stroking the dog's head. "Yeah. You know what to do, don't you?"

He waited for the dog to finish. A few seconds and the bone was clean. The dog looked up at him again.

"You understand," said Manny. "Sure, you do. My old boy. You're my good dog, aren't you, Red?"

He put his hand into the jacket pocket and left it there. The dog tilted its head. Manny waited as long as he could, then took out a small-caliber revolver, turned it around and blew the dust out of the barrel. Then he cocked the hammer, placed the muzzle against the dog's head and pulled the trigger.

In the alley outside the sound was muffled, like the pop of a firecracker, nothing more, but when the boy heard it he screamed and dropped the leash and tried to get the garage door up. Vincent held him back, lifting him off his feet till he could see inside first, but the boy kept on kicking and screaming and crying like he was never going to stop, not even when his father came out and carried him all the way home in the dark.

One of Us

Heyman rang the bell one more time, then walked down the driveway to the shade.

The Lincoln was so quiet he had to open the door to be sure it was running. He switched off the engine, pressed the button to pop the trunk and went around to the back, but before he could reach inside the car the gate behind him buzzed.

A tall boy came up the driveway from the street, dragging his feet through the dry leaves.

"Morning," said Heyman.

The boy had on hiking boots, baggy shorts and a T-shirt with a distorted logo across the front. He tried to focus his eyes. "Uh. You must be the dude."

Heyman nodded. "I'm the driver."

"Uh, Willy, right?"

"Willy's off today."

"Uh." The boy lost interest and stumbled on toward the house.

Heyman called after him. "Is anybody home?"

"Yih."

"You sure?"

"Dude," said the boy, "it's rilly early."

Now Heyman heard an electric guitar crank up, slashing away at one chord over and over, each time on the downbeat. Heart attack music, he thought. He looked at his watch: ten-thirty. The boy disappeared along the side of the house. There was the sound of French doors rattling. The music got louder for a moment and then the doors closed.

He started the engine and set the air conditioning on high again, then punched a number into his cell phone.

"It's me," he said. "Yeah, I found it. No problem. They're about ready."

He shut the phone, took a duster out of the trunk and knocked the dead leaves and haze off the limo until the paint shone like oil. When he saw his reflection sharpen in the black surface he straightened his collar and tie. Then he put the duster away and took the envelope from the trunk, checking to see that everything was there. He lowered the trunk lid.

A few minutes later all three boys came out. One was dressed in old Nikes, jeans and a ratty T-shirt, the other in leather sandals, pleated slacks

and a silk shirt, carrying a Tumi backpack. The tall boy in the baggy shorts still walked cautiously, as if worried about land mines on the property.

Heyman flashed a smile. "Which one of you is Perry Leyman?"

The boy with the old Nikes hooked a thumb at his friend in the sandals.

The man held out his hand. "I'm Paul."

The well-dressed boy looked through him, went directly to the car and waited for Heyman to open the passenger door.

The tall one bumped his head getting into the back.

"Watch yourself, there," said Heyman. "I put some chips and sodas in the armrest. If you need anything else, let me know."

"Where's Willy?" asked Perry, climbing into the front seat.

"He couldn't make it."

"Slick Willy." Perry unwound a pair of earplug headphones. "We go way back. My whole life, almost."

"Is that so?"

"Dude," said a voice from the backseat, "did you bring it?"

Perry undid the Velcro on the backpack. Inside were some folded squares of paper, a CD player and a stack of discs in jewel-cases. He passed it all over his shoulder.

"Yih."

"Your brother got the *delivery?"*

In the mirror Heyman saw the tall one elbow him. "Jason, man, try to be cool."

Perry turned to the driver. "You know where you're going?"

Heyman shifted into reverse and rolled down the driveway, waiting for the security gate to slide back. "Irvine. The Bowl."

"Yih."

"When's the concert?"

"Noon."

"We'll make it. Got your tickets?"

"Passes."

"Great." Heyman put it into drive and started the big tires rolling out of the cul-de-sac and down the canyon. "What kind of bands? Punk?"

In the back seat, the tall one laughed. "Punk went underground."

"Yeah," said Jason, "*way* underground."

"New Wave, then," Heyman said. "Or grunge — is that what they call it now?"

"In the day."

"Black metal," Perry explained.

"What label are they on?"

"Lots of different ones. Indies and imports."

"Not your old man's," said Jason.

"I got my dad to sign *Blutvergieben.*" Perry spoke the word with a practiced German accent. "But the manager screwed him and kept the advance."

"I think I've heard of them," said Heyman.

"Hang a right."

"I thought we'd take Kester to the freeway…"

"We have to pick up Juno." Perry took out a cell phone of his own and hit a programmed number. "Where are you? Stop," he told the driver.

At the next corner a teenage girl with blue streaks in her hair teetered on the curb, about to cross into the cul-de-sac. She had on a black bellyshirt with white letters that spelled *FUCT.* As Heyman pulled over she stashed her phone in a jogger's pouch and squeezed into the backseat.

"Did you call the bitch?" the girl said.

"Nuh," said Perry.

"Thanks!"

"I don't have the number."

"Your dad could get it."

"My dad's in the Caymans."

"Then I'll just have to kick her little ass."

The boys looked out the tinted windows and tried not to laugh.

"You're tripping," Perry told her.

"Is that what you guys think?"

"Nuh."

"Nuh."

"The drummer's pretty big, though," said Perry.

"I could give such a massive shit. Did your brother get the drugs?"

"Later, Juno," Perry told her.

Heyman took the 405 south while she continued to rant. It seemed that she had tried out as lead singer for a band but lost the job to another girl and was royally pissed. They hit a detour after LAX, an overturned truck that forced them onto the surface streets for several miles before he could pick

up another freeway. He kept a map book open and followed the jumbled maze of lines that connected through to Orange County and the coast.

After a while she gave it up and put on the earplugs. From the backseat he heard a faint hiss as she sampled one CD after another, jerking her head to the white noise of insect music. The three boys exchanged information about musicians and remixes and club dates. Glancing at the mirror, he decided that they were no more than fifteen. He was responsible for them while they were in the car, at least as far as their parents and the law were concerned. If he saw any drugs come out he would have to pull over. They would love him for that.

The girl took the earphones off and glared at the boy on her right. "Sean, will *you* stand up for me?"

"Yih."

"Don't shit me."

"I'm not."

"What about you, Jason? Do you even have your knife?"

"Sure, but — "

"There's other bands," Perry told her.

"Fine!" she said. "Then you are all so busted. I'll tell Eric what you do with his *good* shit!"

"You don't talk to my brother. Ever."

"And your dad!"

"Try it. We'll see who's busted. My brother just got accepted at Yale."

"Like I care!"

"One word, Juno."

A half-mile from the concert the traffic stopped dead. Dust swirled up. Vendors walked along the side of the road, hawking posters and fake tattoos. Heyman heard guttural lyrics warring between the cars as twin silver lightning-bolt decals glittered in the sun. With the air conditioner on high the big engine started to overheat. He paid ten dollars to get into the lot and dropped them off in front of the main gate. A poster advertised the German band as the headline act.

"What time?" he asked Perry.

"Eight."

"I'll be here. As close as I can get."

"What's your number?"

The boy meant the cell phone. Heyman wrote it on one of Willy's business cards and gave it to him.

"Call me when you're ready."

"Yih."

He drove on through the parking lot and over the spikes to the street. As soon as he got out of the jam he opened the front console and flipped through Willy's jazz collection. He found a tape of Miles and Cannonball and looked around for a spot to park for a few hours. Then he dialed Willy.

"I just dropped them off."

"Thanks, man."

"Nice kids."

"You made good time," Willy said. "Did you check the trunk?"

"Yeah."

"All there, right?"

"No sweat."

"I owe you."

"Not you. The dad."

"Sorry," said Willy, "but you know I can't cut that shit anymore."

"I know. You're retired."

"All I want to do now is drive."

"You got it."

He stopped off at the nearest strip mall, loosened his tie and stretched his legs. Then he ordered a spicy chicken sandwich and a large coffee at Carl's Jr. The fast-food restaurant was full of all kinds. When he finished eating he returned to the limo, popped the trunk again and took out the padded envelope, but before he could get another look at the photo a panhandler tried to hit him up. He flipped the guy a buck, closed the trunk, got back in the car and cruised the streets for a better spot.

Everywhere he went people were on their way to the concert. Some had sleeveless shirts and lightning bolts on their biceps but most were normal high school kids in cut-offs and tank tops, college couples in cotton prints and white socks. There were a few old heavy metal fans and even some families, the little ones done up in their best SpongeBob and PowerPuff Girls colors. It had been awhile since a rock festival came to town. He drove over to the beachfront and finally found some shade under the palm trees so that he could kick back.

On the jazz album, Cannonball had top billing and most of the time Miles sounded like a sideman. Miles was never greedy. He just laid down his part, got in there and got out of there and picked up his pay. The man was an inspiration.

Heyman took off his black coat and tried to relax. Whenever he switched tapes he could hear a distant booming, as if a storm were about to roll in even though the air was clear all the way to the horizon. As the day wore on he could feel it inside the car, pulsing through the ground and the tires like low-frequency electrical waves, coming closer.

At five o'clock he ran a shaver over his chin, straightened his tie and drove back to the concert site. The throbbing grew deeper as he cruised the perimeter. There were generators beyond the tent, at the rear of the outdoor stage. He could not hear them hammering away but they vibrated and blurred under a floating layer of exhaust. The decibel level from the banked speakers was overpowering, amplifying the lyrics to an hysterical roar. Heyman realized that he could find any pattern at all in the wall of sound, as long as it had to do with anger and rage. The music did not speak to him.

At six o'clock he went back to the fast-food restaurant for more coffee, then gassed up the car and returned to the site. There was a break between sets now and families were already leaving with groggy children on their shoulders. He parked behind a line of limos near the ARTISTS ONLY entrance, reached under the seat and found a rolled-up towel. He stuck it under his coat and took it with him to the gate.

A young security guard in a yellow jacket stopped him.

"Who's next?" asked Heyman.

"Last act. Where's your pass?"

A cascade of pyrotechnics lit the night with blue-white lightning. The headline band crouched at the flap of the tent, ready to run up the scaffolding to the stage. The guard looked skyward, shielding his eyes, and Heyman slipped inside the chain-link fence.

In the tent, behind a tableful of empty green bottles, exhausted musicians pulled off boots and sweaty shirts. Heyman searched the faces of those around the fringes. The photo in the envelope had been taken with a telephoto lens but it was clear enough. He had it memorized.

At the next round of pyro, a man in butter-soft Italian leather waved the headliners toward the scaffold. The crowd began to stomp, then erupted into

thunderous cheers as the band ran up the shaky steps. The phone in Heyman's pocket rang. He covered one ear.

"Dude!" said a frantic voice.

"Perry?"

"He's not here…" The voice broke up. "Where are you? We gotta jam!"

"I'm on my way."

Heyman snapped the phone shut and came up behind the man in the leather jacket. He had rings in his ears and the back of his neck was tattooed like a Samoan chief's.

"Brent Jacobson?"

The man glanced over his shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Those your boys up there?"

He looked Heyman over dismissively, the black sportcoat, the plain white shirt and tie. "Exclusive," he said.

"I have something for you."

"No demos."

"From a Mr. Leyman."

The man squinted. "Never heard of him."

Heyman had his hand in the towel. He felt his fingers close around metal. His thumb released the safety.

"Sure you have. The record company, on Beverly. You signed a contract. Remember?"

At that moment there was another explosion and a bright burst of sparks in the darkness, as the band up above started slashing away.

He made a U-turn and braked in front of the main gate. The German band was unbelievably loud and the older folks were on their way out. Heyman spotted two of the kids. Sean's knees were scraped raw, Jason's jeans were torn and both their shirts were wet and stained. Under the mercury vapor lights the stains looked black. He rolled the window down.

"Where's Perry?" he asked as they fumbled the back door open.

"Go!"

"Where?"

Now Perry came out, walking calmly through the crowd with his designer backpack, one arm around Juno to support her. His shirt was clean

but the front of hers was drenched. Heyman got out and shoved the girl into the backseat, then opened the front passenger door for Perry. He rolled the tinted windows up, made another U and fell into line with the other limos.

"Who's hurt?"

"Nobody."

"You sure?"

"Yih," said Perry. His silk shirt was missing a couple of buttons but unspattered.

Heyman flicked on the dome light and twisted around. The letters on the girl's shirt were still white but Sean's and Jason's were smeared with red. So were their hands and arms. Heyman tossed them the towel.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," said Perry.

"What's all the blood?"

"Some dudes started a fight," said Jason.

"Not us," Sean said.

The girl laughed wildly.

Heyman took the sidestreets for several blocks before he merged onto the boulevard. Ahead was the mall with the fast-food restaurant. He pulled in.

"You can wash up here," he told them.

"Carl's Jr. sucks," said Juno.

"Dude," said Jason frantically, as if it mattered, "she likes McDonald's."

Heyman said, "The head's in back."

While they were gone, he called Willy.

"They stopped for some chow."

"McDonald's?" Willy chuckled. "Got to have their McCrap."

"I'll call the house when we hit L.A."

"Don't bother. The dad's out of town."

"I figured."

"And the mother's never there." A pause on the line. "How did it go?"

"Done."

"Just like that?"

"No problem."

"Pretty slick," said Willy. "Now you're the man."

"No, you are. Take it easy."

Jason came out of the restroom without his T-shirt and motioned for Heyman to lower the window.

"She wants to eat. Is that okay?"

Heyman waited while they sat at a round table and dipped fries and sipped Cokes. He folded the towel and wiped the backseat, then wrapped it around the gun and dropped it into a dumpster full of grease and flies. When they were finished they came back to the car.

On the freeway, in the dark, each of them took out a cell phone and made nervous calls to friends and family, three silhouettes waving their antennae like alien insects. The boys in the back talked to their mothers with the voices of sweet, dutiful sons while the girl giggled and slurred her words. When the calls were over she put her feet up. "Whoo!"

"How much did you take?" asked Jason.

"All gone." She opened her mouth, pointed down her throat, lifted the bottom of her bellyshirt and rubbed her tummy. "See?"

"Yih."

"You really did it," she said.

The boys said nothing.

"The bitch was all ready to sing. But you cut her good. Didn't you."

"It's done," said Perry. "Forget about it."

"You see her face? Sean takes out his lockback and her eyes are all — "

"It's over, Juno."

Sean and Jason looked out the windows, their eyes large and white in the headlights, their sunburned skin a washed-out red in the passing taillights. The girl took her feet down and sprawled across them, about to pass out. In the mirror Heyman saw her head in their laps, first one and then the other, as they continued to stare with blank, stark expressions. After a while she began to snore.

"You like Bush?" said Perry.

It took a few seconds for Heyman to realize that Perry was talking to him.

"I think I've heard of them. They made that video, what was it called?"

"Not the band. George W. The leader of our country."

Heyman considered. "Do you?"

"My dad does. He says he's a patriot."

There was no percentage in lying. "As a matter of fact," Heyman said, "I don't."

"Good." Perry gazed out at the lights as though trying to find a pattern, his eyes empty. "Then I guess that means you can."

"Can what?"

"Be one of us."

He drove on. They carried Juno to a porch and used her key to open the door. Then they went to Perry's house.

"Thank you for waiting," said Sean politely.

"Thanks a lot," added Jason, "sir."

As the others went up the driveway, Perry lingered by the driver's side. He reached into his backpack. It was stuffed with bills now. He handed some over.

"Here's your tip."

"That's okay," said Heyman. "I'm covered."

"You sure?"

"One question, though. What did they do with the knife?"

"Why?"

"Knives are messy. I hope they wiped it before they threw it away. You have to watch those things. The details."

Perry looked off into the darkness, the trees and the bushes inside and outside the security gate, as if listening for something, the movement of unseen creatures that crawled the canyon at night.

"How'd you like to be my driver next time?"

"When?"

"I don't know yet."

"Where are you going?"

Perry thought about it. "The mountains."

"With Juno?"

"Maybe."

"Angeles Crest is good. Nobody ever goes there."

Perry nodded. "I have your number."

"If you're serious."

"How much?"

"Same as Willy."

"I can get it."

"I know."

Heyman waited to see that they were all in safely before he started backing down.

At the side of the house, Perry turned and waved.

"Say hello to Slick Willy for me."

"You got it."

Perry grinned, his teeth small and straight and sharp in the moonlight.

Heyman put on a jazz tape as he came to the freeway, ready to take the car back to Willy's. It was *Workin',* another famous set with Miles. A classic.

"Slick Paulie," he said to himself in the dark, trying out the sound of it. He liked it. "You the man, dude."

He looked into the mirror, adjusting his collar and tie. If he wanted to be a regular driver from now on he would need business cards, an Italian suit, black and shiny, and a big car of his own, a Lincoln or a Caddy, at least, with low mileage. Willy could help him find one. No problem. "The man," he said again and smiled, as taillights streamed past him like blood cells rushing in or out through the arteries of the city. *"Yih."*

In a Silent Way

The night time was the right time.

Holloway tightened the belt around his waist, locked the hall door behind him, went back to the office and slipped a CD into his Discman. It was the session with Miles, Herbie and Chick from '68, the one that taught people how to listen. He slipped the headphones over his ears and set the level from the opening bars of *Shh*. Then he propped his feet up on the desk, closed his eyes and reached for the paper cup.

It was empty.

I knew that, he thought.

He opened his eyes, put his feet down and dropped the cup into the wastebasket.

Got to do everything around here myself.

On the other side of the glass, the rec room glared like a movie set after the cast has gone home. The cleaning man had stacked the chairs on top of the tables so there was nothing that did not show. Every door in the ward beyond was closed tight all the way to the end.

He hit Pause, took off the headphones and felt around for some change in the pockets of the white trousers. Nothing. Where was the wallet? In one of the staff lockers with the other clothes.

Should've thought of that.

He tried the top drawer of the desk. It was locked. He felt for the keys at his waist and leaned forward, as someone screamed.

Holloway hit the switch on the intercom and heard only the crackle of white noise. The bare walls outside the office added an overlay of wind-tunneling, like waves in a sea cave. He left the circuit open to be sure the screaming had stopped. Now low, guttural sounds began to take shape in the roar as the last door at the end cracked open on darkness. Pale fingers and half a face appeared in the tall doorway, one eye staring at him along the gray-green wall.

"Crystal? Well, come on out…"

Two paper slippers and the wrinkled folds of a nightgown. A young woman of no more than eighteen or nineteen stood there. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail but it came loose as she tiptoed over the checkerboard floor and flew away from her face as she began to run. She lost a slipper and stumbled against a closed door, saw which one it was and hurried on in

a zigzag pattern, afraid to step on the dark tiles. By the time she got to the glass her eyes were wide.

"What are *you* doing here?" she said when he opened the door to the office.

"I'm the night man."

"No, you're not. Where's Mr. Pfeiffer?"

"He never showed." Holloway jerked his head, motioning her inside. "Could you keep it down, Crystal? Folks are sleeping."

"Not *that* one."

He listened to the roar from across the rec room before he clicked the door shut.

"Old Roy? Yeah, he got a rhythm going. Just like Tony Williams."

"Who?"

"You don't know 'bout Lifetime? Greatest fusion band ever, 'cept for Miles." He flipped through the CDs on the desk. "Want a taste?"

"Just make him stop."

"How about a pill?"

"I took one. It didn't do jack shit." She squeezed her head between her hands. "He's driving me crazy!"

Holloway chuckled. "Short trip."

"I mean it, Charlie."

"Hey, chill. Some folks snore, all right? How you gonna make it on the outs if you can't handle that?"

"It's not just snoring."

"What is it?"

"He — says things while I'm sleeping."

"How can you hear it, then?"

"Can't *you?"*

"You're not saving up your medication, are you? So you can OD?"

"*No*."

"All right, Crystal." He found the key to the cabinet. "This one's on the house. Thorazine, right?"

She sat on the edge of the desk, shooting nervous glances through the glass while Holloway moved the little prescription bottles around on the shelf. "You'd know that, if you were the real night man."

"I know plenty. Here." He remembered exactly which bottle it was. He rolled a pill into his palm and held it out. When she tried to snatch it away

he closed his fingers. "What you gonna do for me?"

She studied his face, saw something there she did not like, started to fasten the top button of her nightgown, then gave up and left it open.

"Whatever."

He smiled, nodding at another door in the wall next to the office. It led to the staff restrooms and the lounge. "Get me a coffee."

"And you'll give me my pill?"

"Would I lie?"

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Then we'll try something else."

"Like what?"

"Whatever it takes."

"You better. Or I'll tell my doctor."

"Kornfield? I like talkin' to him."

"Give it to me."

"Coffee, first." He held the pill between thumb and forefinger, a tiny shining globe, a world of quiet and deep sleep. "Right here, Crystal. It's got your name on it."

"Okay."

"Good girl."

She started out of the office, then turned back.

"I need money for the machine."

"Just a minute."

He picked out the key to the top drawer. The day man kept petty cash, he was sure. Where? He saw Bic pens and Wite Out for the charts, a letter opener, rubber bands and paper clips, a bondage-and-discipline magazine and a dogeared Stephen King paperback. The big drawers below were not locked. He pulled them out and found pads of blank forms and a brown paper bag with a rotting apple in it, but no coins.

"Don't go away, now," Holloway told her.

"Where can I go? You have the keys."

"That's right. The man with the keys. That's me."

He stepped out of the office, unlocked the hall door and walked a few feet to the supply closet. He had to stop and tighten the belt one more notch to keep the trousers up. He reached in without turning on the bulb and felt for another pair of trousers hanging from a hook inside, removed his wallet

and came back to the office. He riffled through the billfold and snapped out a crisp dollar.

"Here you go, sweets."

"Cream and sugar?"

"Black." He tossed her a second dollar. "And get yourself a hot chocolate. The eagle flies tonight."

He left the hall door unlocked for her, then sat down, took one of the objects out of the drawer and placed it on the desk where she would see it, slipped the headphones over his ears and pressed Play.

Shh had already segued into *Peaceful*, all Miles and Joe Zawinul with some tasty drum riffs from Tony Williams. Who was doing the vocal? He heard a broken baritone in the background, singing scat, so incoherent it sounded like a Baptist preacher talking in tongues. He saw that she had left the office door ajar and lifted the headphones away from one ear.

The voice came from beyond the rec room, third door from the end of the ward. The old man sounded like he was gargling. Holloway could have sworn that the glass panes were vibrating.

She came back with two new cups, holding them out so they would not spill on her nightgown. Now she had lost the other slipper. Her eyes were big and shiny.

"Don't go in the hall," she said.

"How come?"

"It's not safe."

He saw that her hand was wet and shaking. The cup was only half full. She had lost some of it on the way. He put his fingers over the steaming hot chocolate as he took both cups from her and set them on the desk.

"Why not?"

"The floor's soft."

"Well, you didn't get stuck, now, did you?"

"I had to stay on the white parts…"

She put her hands over her face and cried, her body shaking and wracked with sobs. He didn't like to see that.

"Sit down, Crystal."

Her fingers closed into claws at her eyes. He took hold of her stiff shoulders and helped her into the chair. When he tried to get the headphones over her ears her hair got in the way.

"How 'bout some music? Make you forget all about it."

"You think I'm crazy."

"Want to talk, then?"

"You're not my shrink."

"That's right, I'm just the night man. But you can talk and I can listen."

"Mr. Pfeiffer never listens to me."

"Well, he's got some down time tonight. You lucked out."

She finally took her hands away and let him see her face. It was red and blotchy and her eyes were still big and black and now they were leaking all over the front of her gown, wet spots growing darker on the fabric. She looked like a scared child. She spoke fast as if afraid someone would hear and make her stop before she got it out.

"The black squares…"

"What about 'em?"

"They're melting."

"How come?"

"Something…underneath."

He leaned in. "Mmm-hmm."

"You don't believe me."

"'Course I do."

"Why do they *do* that?"

"It's the sound."

"It is?"

"They call it Ultra-Low Frequency Modulation."

"Who does?"

"The cops. CIA. They got a machine that makes sound waves, right through the walls. It melts anything. Keeps you crazy, so you can't sleep."

"I know!"

He looked around as if the room might be bugged. "They have special agents, too. Plainclothes."

"Even in here?" she whispered. "Do you think Roy…?"

"What does he say?"

"My name."

"What else?"

"I don't know."

"You can trust me."

"Things."

"What things?"

"I told you, I don't know! It's so loud…"

"Sure is. Me, all I want is some peace and quiet, so I can play my music."

"I knew you could hear it."

"'Course I can."

He held down the button on the intercom. The gargling snore from the ward rasped like amplified tires on gravel.

"Old Roy. Somebody has to shut him up, before he does some damage. You know, noise can give you cancer. Gets inside your bones and makes 'em melt."

"Is that really true?"

He nodded solemnly.

She dried her eyes with her sleeve. "I need a Kleenex."

"You got it." He looked around for the tissues.

"On top of the file cabinet," she told him.

He gave her the whole box. "Now tell me what Roy says to you."

The glass had stopped vibrating. Outside the office, the ward was still. She blew her nose.

"I'm okay now."

"Till he starts in again. Messing with your mind. It's not your fault, what he tells you to do."

"That's just it — I don't *know* what he's telling me."

"I do."

"What?"

"He wants to rest."

"He does?"

"Only he can't. The sound's in his bones, and it comes out through his mouth. You'd be doing him a favor."

"How?"

"If you gave him peace."

She snapped to and shook her head sharply from side to side. "I'm not supposed to think about stuff like that."

"Why not?"

"Dr. Kornfield says I have a lot of work to do."

"That's not what he told me."

"When?"

"Today. Said you're ready. Even wrote it in your chart."

"Let me see."

"Can't. You know the rules."

"You're full of it, Charlie."

Holloway drew out the top file drawer and removed a folder. He opened the folder and flipped through the pages under her picture. There was a case history, a clipping about her murder trial, a copy of the commitment papers and a record of medications.

"Says so right here. You're ready for release." He held the page so she could not read it. "'Patient shows progress…symptoms in remission… recommend discharge to Braewood.'"

"I'm so sure."

"Did I ever lie to you, Crystal?"

"Braewood's in Redondo Beach."

"Mmm-hmm. Right on the ocean."

"But it's private. For rich people."

"They get money from the state now. Real nice. Boats, field trips. You could even get a job on the outs. One sweet deal."

"What do I have to do?"

"Nothing. You're entitled." He started to close the folder. "Wait. Just one thing."

"No shit."

He moved his eyes as though reading. "'If the patient remains free of audio-visual aphasia…' That's hallucinations."

"Okay, okay." She wrinkled her brow, concentrating. "I won't tell him I hear it. Thanks, Charlie…"

"You can't bullshit a doctor. He'll know."

"Then *how?"*

"Make it stop. So you can get your sleep. That way you'll be straight tomorrow, when Korny does his rounds."

"I don't *know* how to stop it."

"No?" He turned his back on her and took his time putting the folder away. "Sometimes you do what you have to do, Crystal. Seize the moment."

"You said *you'd* make him stop."

"Yeah, well, I can't do it myself. Restraints, cold tubs, all that, it takes authorization."

"You could call a doctor."

"This time of night? He'd be plenty pissed."

"I thought you were my friend!"

"I am, Crystal. But I can't do everything. Nobody can. You have to prove you can handle it, if you want to get out of here."

He kept his back to her, watching her reflection in the glass behind the file cabinet, the way she fingered the objects on the desk. The chrome steel letter opener glinted in the overhead light. He closed the drawer. When he turned around the letter opener was gone.

She covered something with a quick fold in the lap of her nightgown and pretended to be busy with the cup.

"I better get back to my room," she said. "You can give me my pill now."

"I already did."

"No, you didn't."

"That chocolate taste good?"

"Yes." She gulped down the last of it.

"Then you just had your pill."

She blinked at him, confused.

"See?" He opened his hand and showed her that the pill was gone. "I put it in your cup, when I set it down. Didn't even see me, did you?"

She looked into the empty cup. There was a white residue dissolved in the bottom and some of the grains still clung to the sides.

"What are you, Charlie, a magician?"

He winked. "I've been practicing."

She was on her feet, hiding one hand nervously behind her nightgown. "Will you be here all night?"

"Gotta take a break in a minute. Might be gone awhile. You can take care of yourself, can't you, Crystal?"

"Yes," she said quickly.

"Sure, you can. You'll sleep good tonight, I promise. Soon as you take care of business."

He watched her cross the rec room, stepping on only the white tiles, careful to avoid a hidden landscape just beneath the surface that might force its way up at any moment, snuffing out the light. Before she got to her room she turned back one last time.

"You can visit me at Braewood!" she called out. "All right, Charlie?"

He gave her a thumbs up and lifted the headphones.

The title track was over. Now *It's About That Time* was nearly finished, the last cut on the disc. He put the phones down while it played out,

retrieved the old, empty coffee cup from the wastebasket and left the office.

In the hall, he reached into the supply closet for the shirt and trousers he had left there and picked up the girl's slipper on the way. There were a few drops of coffee on the tiles, the white ones as well as the black, like a trail of bread crumbs in a forest. He started to scuff them out, then decided it did not make any difference. She was wrong. The tiles here were solid.

He used the keys to get into the restroom and pushed open the first stall.

"How you doin', Pfeiffer?" he said to the man on the toilet. "Sleepin' it off?"

The man was passed out in his undershorts and black socks. Holloway draped the clothes from the supply closet over the stall door and rinsed the cup at the sink, shaking it to be sure all traces of the grainy white residue in the bottom washed away down the drain, then crumpled it up and dropped it into the trash.

He took off the white trousers and staff shirt, checking out his reflection in the mirror for a moment before he pulled them onto the other man. Pfeiffer did not wake up but his arms were thick and heavy and one of his feet got stuck at the cuff. Finally Holloway put his own clothes back on. They felt good. The trousers were a lot smaller and the belt closed at just the right notch.

He carried the sleeping man out of the restroom and back down the hall to the office. Pfeiffer was dead weight so he had to take his time. Holloway propped the feet up on the desk and folded the hands in front and put the keys back onto the belt. Then he tied the shoelaces and made sure everything was exactly as it had been when he left his room and went to the office the first time to buy the night man a coffee.

He picked up his Discman and CDs and took them back to his room.

On the way he noticed a few drops in front of the third door from the end. They weren't brown yet like coffee but still bright red. The trail led to Crystal's door. Someone would see it and they would find the letter opener, too. She had probably tried to hide it but the way the rooms were set up there was no place that did not show. He dropped one slipper in front of the door and kicked the other one over in front of hers just to be on the safe side, and went on to his room.

He lay down on his bed and slipped the headphones over his ears.

Before he pressed Play he listened for other sounds. The ward was quiet now. Soon it would be dawn and the noises would begin again, the white

crush of traffic from outside the walls and the shuffling of paper slippers and the arguments in the rec room, but for now all was still. There was time at last, plenty of time to listen to Miles and Chick and Herbie and Wayne Shorter and John McLaughlin jamming the rest of the night away, with no competition from Old Roy or anyone else. Dr. Kornfield would not do his rounds till the afternoon so Holloway could sleep in, the same as Crystal.

The night time is the right time, he thought.

He set the level from the opening bars of *Shh*, rolled over with the headphones locked securely around his ears and closed his eyes so that he would not have to think about the shadows on the floor here and what might lie just below the surface. His face had a peaceful expression, a sublime and nearly absolute peace of the kind he had not known for a very long time, so long he had almost forgotten what it was like.

My Present Wife

The road was wide and well-lighted for the first mile or so, then narrowed to a single lane and led into the foothills, where the signs were impossible to read even with her high beams. That was almost enough to make Leslie turn around and go home, especially when the other car sped up and began to close the distance. It had been on her tail since she left the freeway.

She tried to ignore the headlights and stopped under the first streetlamp in several long blocks, took the invitation out of her purse and looked at it one more time.

The hand-drawn map on the back was useless. It might have been a child's sketch of a tree made with black crayon, the branches leading off the page into unknown territory. The lines were not labeled and there was only an X at the top, a house number and the words *Saddleback Circle.*

When the headlights glared in her rearview mirror she had to glance up.

The other car slowed, pulling even and hovering for a moment. Her side window was milky with frost. She reached for the button and rolled the glass down.

"Richard," she shouted, "leave me alone or I'll call the police! I mean it this time!"

Then she got a good look at the other car. It was a brand-new Chrysler, shiny black and heavy with chrome fittings, so dark inside that she could not see the driver. Embarrassed, she held up the invitation and waved it, accidentally brushing the controls by the steering wheel.

"Sorry, I — I thought you were someone else. Do you know where—?"

But now her wipers were on, skittering back and forth across the windshield, drowning out her own voice. The tinted passenger window on the other car remained closed.

"Wait, please! I think I'm lost…!"

The Chrysler glided silently past her to the next corner, a plume of white exhaust billowing up behind it.

She spotted the same car a few minutes later, its turn signals winding uphill in a pattern that vaguely resembled part of the hand-drawn map. Then there was an entire row of red taillight reflectors ahead, stopped along both

sides of the road, so many that there could be no doubt she had finally found the party. It took a few minutes more to locate a parking space next to the split-rail fence on Saddleback Circle.

A sharp wind blew out of the canyon, gathering force and turning back on itself as if chilled by the cul-de-sac at the end. Leslie walked toward the glow of a big house, while heavy steps sounded beyond the fence and white breath condensed in the air between the trees. A riderless horse, pale and steaming against the darkness, stood snorting and pawing the earth. She closed her collar and hurried on.

The house shone like iced gingerbread, all the doors and windows sparkling with color and movement. The gravel driveway was still full of cars. Someone stepped forward from the shadows and she put her hand up to shield her eyes from the glare of Christmas lights over the porch.

"Hello?" she called out, shivering.

"Les, you made it."

"Coral? It feels like it's going to snow!"

"Don't say that in L.A. It's bad luck."

"Am I too late?"

"Come on in, for God's sake." Coral led her up the wooden steps. "Get yourself some eggnog and I'll introduce you around."

A dozen people were jammed around the coatrack in the foyer, the faces of the taller ones blurring as they moved aside for their hostess. The air was warm with body heat but Leslie's fingers trembled as she undid the button at her throat and smoothed her collar.

"I can't stay."

"You have a late date?"

"Right, Coral."

"Then stick with me. I'll fix you up."

"No, really, I'll just mingle…"

Leslie squinted in the sudden brightness, gazing through crepe paper and popcorn strung from the vaulted living room ceiling. The party was close to breaking up but a few tanned women in satin and denim stood talking to men with cowboy boots and silver belt buckles, while long-legged teenagers whispered behind a table full of empty pie tins and half-eaten cookies. When she turned around Coral was not there.

She rubbed her hands together and wandered into the hall, past matted photographs of her friend in a black hunt cap and coat jumping a chestnut

mare over hurdles. A man's voice droned from one of the bedrooms, describing how he had broken his ankle during a flying dismount the previous year. Only his broad shoulders and pressed Levi's were visible through the doorway. Three women sat on the edge of the bed, listening with lips parted. Leslie continued down the hall before he could roll up the leg of his jeans to show them the scar.

In the den, Coral took her arm and led her to a balding man on the sofa.

"Ed, you remember Les, from the Tri-Valley meet. We went out for dinner after."

"Oh, right," he said, half-standing, the top of his head a pink smear. "Did you ever sell that Hermes saddle?"

"Not yet," said Leslie.

"How much do you want for it?" asked a drunk woman on the other end of the sofa.

"I haven't decided."

"Where's your friend?" said the balding man.

"Who?"

"Big guy, longrider coat. What's his name?"

Coral said in a low voice. "Honey, that was last summer."

"Richie, that's it." He looked around. "Is he here?"

Coral rolled her eyes. "They're not together anymore."

"Oh. Too bad. Nice fellow."

"Sit down, Ed." When they were back in the hall, Coral whispered, "I'm so sorry. I told him, but he doesn't listen."

"It's okay. I'm over it." They passed the bedroom, now empty. "Who was that man?"

If "You know my husband!"

"I mean in there, with those women."

"What did he look like?"

"I couldn't see his face. Tall, black hair…"

"Sounds familiar."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" Coral steered her toward a table of hors d'oeuvres in the dining room. "Do yourself a favor. Try a different type, for once?"

Leslie blinked and lowered her head, fumbling for a paper plate. The first chafing dish contained a few wieners floating in water. Before she could open the next one small feet thundered behind her and five or six children ran to the table and filled the last of the hot dog buns. When they were gone she set her plate aside, reached for a cut-glass cup and dipped some punch out of the bowl.

"Do you have any vodka to go with this?" she asked, but Coral had already gone on to the living room.

Leslie explored the rest of the downstairs.

She passed several couples. There were a few single men leaning in doorways or working the halls, their faces indistinct as she squeezed by them with her head down. In an enclosed back porch the teenaged girls were busy rehearsing a skit of some sort. The yard was illuminated by floodlights and the trees shook silently beyond the glass, teasing a view of absolute darkness. She listened to the girls for a minute, then found her way to the TV room.

A young mother held her sleepy son on her lap, stroking his forehead as they watched a tape of *The Man from Snowy River,* and a woman in a short black cocktail dress stood in the corner talking to a slim, sandy-haired man. Leslie was about to move on when the woman spotted her.

"Les?"

"Hi, Jane." Leslie started out of the porch, but the woman was already at her side.

"I haven't seen you in so long!"

"I don't ride anymore."

"Why not?"

"I moved."

"So where are you taking lessons?"

"Nowhere. I can't, till my arm heals."

Jane seemed not to hear her and turned to the man in the corner. "Do you know — ?"

"I was looking for Judy," said Leslie as he came over to join them. "Is she…?"

"This is Les," the woman told him. "Ask her. She has a fabulous horse."

Leslie avoided his eyes. "I used to."

"What happened?" the man asked.

"I had to sell him."

"You should have seen her in the Tri-Valley Finals," said Jane.

"That was one of Suzie's horses. She let me take him out for the day."

"Who paid?" he said. "Or did you go Dutch?"

Jane laughed too loudly and said, "Have you met—?"

"Michael."

"I don't think so." His fingers were soft, smooth and unknotted. She withdrew her hand and reached for her purse, but it was not at her side. She had left it on the coatrack in the foyer.

"Where do you ride?"

"Shady Acres. I mean, I did."

"How do you like it?"

"Beautiful!" said Jane. "You'll have to come out sometime."

"I should. My wife wants to ride, but I'm afraid I'll get rug-burns."

Jane cracked up.

Leslie could not quite meet his eyes, which stood out in an otherwise ordinary, almost uncompleted face. "Hunters and jumpers?"

"Not that advanced. She's only been on a horse a few times."

"Well," said Jane, "I can show you some easy trail rides. It's right by the State Park."

"Great. I'll tell her all about it."

"Where is your wife?"

"She's on her way. She had to work late." He turned his attention to Leslie again. "What does a decent horse go for?"

She averted her gaze. "That depends on what you're looking for, I guess."

"Well…" Jane pulled at her lip as she waited for his eyes to fall on her again. "I'm not supposed to talk about it, but Suzie told me about a steal up in Ventura County. An eight-year-old, A-circuit champion, for — "

Just then a bell clanged.

Leslie went to the hall, following the sound.

Coral held up a metal triangle and beat it with a soup ladle as though calling ranch hands to a chuckwagon dinner. When the remaining guests had assembled in the dining room she announced a special treat, a one-act play written and performed by the Junior Class girls. Leslie saw the teenagers through the open kitchen door, waiting with handwritten notebook pages, practicing their lines one last time. She took a position along the wall nearest the living room, as a pretty blond girl stepped in front of the buffet table and began speaking.

"Kind ladies and gentlemen, I pray you, do not judge me! I was but a poor maid who lost her way…"

The girl held out her arms, palms up, in a gesture of supplication. From the foyer came the rustling of coats as a few more couples took this opportunity to slip away. Leslie watched the girl, not looking at the hall to see if Jane and the fair-haired man had followed her.

"…So when he came to Sparta and offered me such a fine mount, how could I resist?"

Now a crude horse's head bobbed out of the kitchen, followed by a second half made of brown paper with a real horsehair tail. A high-pitched whinnying came from under the paper and the two halves of the horse reared up and bumped the girl, who fell onto her back.

Next to Leslie, a woman nearly spilled her glass of wine.

The audience giggled and applauded. The horse took a premature bow. The woman held her husband's arm to keep from losing her balance.

"Is this R-rated?" she said, convulsed with laughter. "Her mother's going to die!"

"It's all right," said her husband behind the brim of his Stetson. "I think it's *Equus.*"

"I think it's the Trojan Horse," said another voice.

Leslie raised her eyes and saw that a man wearing a camel's-hair sportcoat and a bolo tie had squeezed in next to her.

"Don't you?" he asked her, leaning closer.

"I really don't know."

"What are you drinking, little lady?"

She shook her head. "Nothing, thank you."

She let herself out onto the wide front porch and felt for her purse, but it was still inside. Couples walked down the steps to the gravel, blowing on their hands, jingling keyrings, unlocking cars in the driveway. Headlights flashed and for a second the blond girl from the play was silhouetted against the split-rail fence, imprisoned by the arms of a teenaged boy. The headlights moved on and there was the sound of laughter in the dark. Leslie leaned on the railing as footsteps passed behind her from the other end of the porch.

"Excuse me," she said without turning, "but do you have a cigarette, by any chance?"

"Well, let's just see here once." It was the one Jane had introduced as Michael. He checked his shirt pocket and came up with a crushed pack of Marlboros. "Hey, you scored."

"I don't want to take your last one."

He straightened the cigarette for her. "My wife says I should quit, anyway. You can help me get rid of the evidence."

She cupped her fingers around the flame, careful not to touch his hand. "Did she finally make it?"

"She'll be here. She promised."

"What does she do?"

"Legal work," he said.

"I'd like to meet her."

"You need a lawyer?"

She inhaled and blew out a cone of smoke. "Oh, I guess not."

"Sexual harassment, or a quickie divorce? Let's see, you keep the house and car…"

"I'm not married."

"Palimony? That's easy. But first you have to stop calling and hanging up. Leaving notes on his car."

"It's not me."

"You found a dead horse in your bed?"

"Not yet." She smiled at him and coughed.

"Smooth, huh?"

"This is the first one I've had in a long time."

"Why did you stop?"

"Someone I know — knew — didn't like it."

"He should meet my present wife."

"How many times have you been married?"

"Only once. It's a joke. I used to call her my first wife, but she didn't like it. So now I introduce her as my present wife. She doesn't think that's funny, either."

"I wonder why."

"You're a lot like her."

"What's her name?"

"Sometimes I forget," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

A burst of whistles and applause from inside the house.

"I'd better go in," she said. "Thanks."

"The first one's free." His eyes shone out of the shadows. "Seriously. She can get you a restraining order."

"Who, your present wife?"

"If that doesn't work, we'll tie him up and dump him on a trail somewhere. State Parks are always good."

They laughed.

Mothers hugged their shiny-faced daughters, who made desperate hand signals to each other across the dining room. Leslie touched the blond one's arm.

"You were wonderful."

"Thanks!" the girl said in a sweet, breathless voice.

"You're Tara, aren't you?"

"Um, yeah." The girl looked over her head, scanning the room with restless green eyes. She had a broad forehead and skin that almost glowed.

"You probably don't remember me," said Leslie. "I helped you train for your first Junior Class meet."

The girl pretended not to hear and swept by her to the hall, where the two halves of the horse, now in riding clothes, led her away. They were all legs and gangly arms, their silken hair pinned to the backs of long necks above collarless dressage shirts, their clean faces mouthing words that could almost be read from across the room. Leslie smiled after them and went into the kitchen.

Coral and three other women were putting food into stainless steel bowls.

"Well, it's about time," said the one with the short haircut.

"Judy? I was looking for you!"

"We had a bet you wouldn't show."

"Michelle! And Jeannie…" Leslie embraced them. "Sorry I'm late. I saw Tara — she's adorable. What a great Helen."

"Next week she'll be Joan of Arc," said Michelle. "All she does is watch that movie over and over."

"Does she still ride?"

"She will, if I get her some chain mail."

"Judy has a bone to pick with you," said Jeannie, covering a bowl with plastic wrap.

"What about?"

"When's the last time I saw you at Shady Acres?" asked the one with short hair.

"A few months."

"Try six. Right?" she asked Jeannie, pouring the leftover eggnog back into a carton.

"I had to see Kahlua when I moved out."

"That's no excuse. You're the best rider I've ever seen."

"No, I'm not…"

"And you know darn well you can ride Jack any time. All you have to do is ask."

Leslie blushed. "That's really, really nice of you, Jude. I will, as soon as my arm's healed."

"It's healed now, and so are you. Got it? You dumped the jerk and you're back in the mix. What are you doing Saturday?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"The Grand Prix at Oak Ridge. Box seats."

"I'll call you." Leslie glanced over Judy's shoulder at the kitchen window, as a tall dark figure passed in the yard outside. She put her hand to her throat. "Who else did you invite?"

"Friends only."

"I mean tonight," she said to Coral.

"Is it cold in here?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Then why are you shivering?" Coral put the last bowl away and closed the refrigerator door. "Come on. I can't let you leave like this."

There were plates, half-eaten hot dog buns and torn wrapping paper on every surface. A few sportcoats and plaid Pendletons still prowled the edges of the living room. Coral led her upstairs, past small children bundled like teddy bears for the ride home. She thanked the mothers and fathers for coming, then steered Leslie into the master bedroom.

"I'll help you clean up."

"No, you won't." Coral rummaged in the closet, pulled out a suede jacket with sheepskin lining. "Here. Put this on."

"I'll bring it back."

"Saturday. The old gang will be there." She helped Leslie get her bad arm into the jacket and looked at her. "I know it's been a rough year for you. But it's over."

"I guess so."

Leslie turned away and opened the curtains above a table that held Coral's trophies and ribbons, just enough to see down into the backyard.

"Did you ever find out who she was?" said Coral.

Below, the yard was empty, the gate latched. There was no one on the other side of the house next to the kitchen. In the distance taillights wound slowly up the canyon road like blood cells through a clogged artery. She let the curtains fall closed.

"He never admitted it. He told me I was paranoid, and after a while I almost believed him. But I know I did the right thing. It's just that sometimes…"

"You don't call him, do you?"

"He calls me."

"What does he say?"

"Nothing."

"Then how do you know?"

"Well, if it's not him, then that means he was right. And I *am* paranoid."

"My God, Les."

"Sometimes I think he's following me. Like tonight."

"I definitely did not invite Richard!"

"There was a car behind me, on the way."

"If he's stalking you — "

"It wasn't even his car. But when I saw it I thought…"

Coral sat her down on the bed.

"Listen. There are plenty of men out there. You could have met a few tonight, if you'd take those damned blinders off."

"I don't want another relationship."

"Who's talking about that? Take them for what they are: fun and games. I'll tell you a secret. The rest of it isn't that great."

"Then why did you get married again?"

"Ed's a good man. And I love our new house. But there's only one first time." She pressed Leslie's fingers. "You're lucky. Everything's still right there in front of you, like a candy store — all you have to do is enjoy. Like the song says, 'love the one you're with,' right? What's the first thing you do when you get thrown? Pull yourself together and get back on! So give yourself a chance. For me?"

At the foot of the stairs her husband was busy picking loose popcorn out of the rug. His body was thick around the middle and when he got up he had to hold the banister for support. Coral helped him stand.

"Leave that," she said, resting her head on his shoulder. "You're such a neatness freak."

He kissed her with a noisy smack. His pink face was detailed in this light, with kindly lines etched around the eyes.

"I'll do it," said Leslie. She found a paper cup and began collecting the popcorn.

"It can wait till morning."

Michelle and Judy came in from the dining room.

"Who's here?" Coral asked them.

"Just some guys," said Judy. "The kind that never give up."

"Jeannie's in the kitchen," said Michelle. "She drank too much eggnog."

"Put her in the guest bedroom. She can sleep it off."

"The junior girls are there."

"What are they doing?"

"Talking about boys and horses."

"Are there any boys?"

"Only that trainer, with the story about his leg. He has one boot off."

"Pervert," said Ed and headed for the back of the house.

Leslie crossed the dining room. There were candy canes and sugared peanuts on the carpet, cookie crumbs folded in napkins by every chair. As

she gathered them up colorful holiday sweaters and turquoise watchbands flashed beyond the arches. The faces of the men who had stayed were no longer blurred but easy to see now, weathered and tan or pale but interesting, professionals and jocks from the city or the country, each with a story to tell. Easy laughter lilted from every direction. It would take a few more minutes for them all to say their good-byes. She grabbed as much trash as she could and took it to the kitchen.

As she emptied her arms, a low moaning came from the floor by the butcher block table.

"Jeannie, what are you doing down there?"

"Sitting."

Michelle and Judy came in with a crumpled paper tablecloth. They stepped around Jeannie and found the trash can.

"How are we going to get her on her feet?"

"Tell her Hap Hanson's in the other room."

"He's too old."

"He's not, is he?" said Leslie.

"Too old?"

"No, in the other room."

"Sure."

"Who *is?*" Leslie asked.

They both turned from the sink and looked at her. Michelle winked at Judy. "There might be a couple of single guys out there."

"Like?"

"Chris, from the barn. And Jason the baby doctor, and that guy from Westlake Village, the lawyer—"

"His wife's the lawyer," said Leslie.

"Which one is he?" asked Judy.

"Curly hair, five-eight or nine…"

"That's him. He's definitely married."

"To his first wife!"

"I know. I was just wondering."

"If he fools around?"

"*No*. He's nice, though. Funny. Is he a friend of Coral's?"

"She didn't invite him."

"His wife, then," said Michelle. "She rides."
"Not yet," Leslie told them. "She wants to take lessons."
"I heard she works for a TV station."
"She's a vet," said Judy.
"They just moved here," Michelle said. "From Phoenix."
"Texas," said Judy.
"He told me San Diego…" Jeannie mumbled from the floor.
"Maybe he crashed the party."
"Why would he do that?"
"Looking for his present wife!"
"Remember, he's off-limits."
"I *know*," said Leslie, "okay?"

She made coffee and helped her friends walk Jeannie to a sofa in the living room, then left them and joined Coral and her husband. The front door was open just enough to show the blond girl at the edge of the porch, kissing someone goodnight in the shadows. It was not the same boy she had been with earlier. Leslie lingered in the foyer as the last guests put on their coats. Michelle made her promise to meet for lunch next week, then went outside to find her daughter.

"You finally stopped shivering," said Coral.
"I feel better now."
"Good."
"Glad you could make it," said Ed.
Leslie met his eyes without flinching. "Thanks for inviting me. You don't know."
"Any time," said Coral and held her. "I mean it," she whispered. "See you Saturday?"
"I'd love to."
She went back to the living room. Judy would take Jeannie home and bring her back to pick up her car in the morning. Then Leslie remembered her purse. It was on the rack, behind a long black leather coat.
"Whose is this?"
"Mine," said Ed.
"It was my present to him," Coral said. "Because he's my sweetie."
"Oh." Leslie hooked her arm through the strap of the purse.

"You drive carefully, now," Ed told her.

Leslie started out, then came back and hugged him, too.

"I will," she said.

She closed the door. Now the moon shone down like a huge streetlamp, illuminating the fence and the tops of the trees beyond the front yard. There were no more cars or shadows in the driveway. She started down the steps.

Behind her, the boards squeaked and a man's voice said, "Need a ride?"

"No, thanks."

"Sure?"

"I have a car."

"Where? I'll drive you."

She noticed a black Chrysler still parked by the curb at the end of the driveway and walked faster, digging for her keys. She shook her purse but nothing jingled. When she stopped to open it he bumped into her and the purse fell to the ground.

"Let me get that, little lady."

"I can do it."

She knelt before a pair of snakeskin boots. They belonged to the one with the camel's-hair coat and bolo tie.

"Wonder what happened to those keys?" he said with a grin.

"How did you know…?"

"I got it, honey," said another voice.

"Over here," she called as the sandy-haired man came down from the porch. "Where were you, Michael?"

"Looking for you." To the tall man he said, "We're okay here, pardner."

When the other man left she said, "You have wonderful timing."

"You, too."

"I feel so stupid. Now I can't find my keys." She kept sifting through the gravel with her fingers. "I left my purse for a while. You don't suppose that man…?"

"Let's just see here once."

He put his hand in his pocket and clinked his own keys. Then he leaned down and raked the gravel, and suddenly her keyring glinted there in the moonlight.

"Oh, God, thanks!"

"Where are you parked?"

"All the way at the end."

"I'll walk you." He helped her up. "Do you have a long way to go?"

"A few miles. Once I get to the freeway I'm okay."

"Left at the first street, then follow it till you see the on-ramp."

"Got it." When he patted his pockets she reached into her purse. "How about a menthol?"

"Just like my wife."

"I thought she didn't smoke."

"She used to."

"I hope she's all right. Did she call?"

In the flare of the lighter his hair was red and his smile ironic. He cupped his hands over the flame, enclosing her fingers.

"She wouldn't know the number here."

"Does she have a cell phone?"

"No. She doesn't want people bugging her when she's away from the clinic."

Leslie lit her own cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke, white as frost from the chill in the air. "I thought she was a lawyer."

"The office, I mean."

They came to the end of the driveway. Ahead the trees were so tall that the rest of the canyon was black.

"Do you mind if I follow you?" she said.

"Sounds like a plan."

"In case I get lost again." She fingered her keys, took a deep breath, held it and finally let it out. "Look, would you like to have coffee or something? It's so cold. I was thinking about stopping, before I get on the freeway."

"There's a Denny's by the underpass."

"Is that the only place open?"

"Something wrong with Denny's?"

"I just meant…"

A car drove out of the canyon and he turned to her, the headlights blazing in his eyes. "Not good enough for you?"

"What?"

"Nothing's ever good enough, is it?"

She tried to step back but he had hold of her wrist, the one that was almost healed.

"You're hurting me!"

"Sometimes I wonder why I married you in the first place," he said, his breath steaming until his face was only a blur again. "Well, listen up, bitch. Tonight you're going to do exactly what I tell you and like it! Got that? I might even take you to the State Park afterwards. There's never anybody around…"

Then, jerking her so violently that her feet left the ground and her toes scraped the dirt and the rocks, he dragged her the rest of the way down into the cul-de-sac.

No One You Know

This time the phone rang for ten minutes before she picked it up.

"Michael, stop. Or I'll call the police."

"We need to talk," he said.

She put the book down on the bed, took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes so hard that they made little squeaking sounds in their sockets.

"There's nothing to talk about."

"It wasn't what you think…"

"What was it, a mercy fuck?"

"I'm not going to lie to you. I made a mistake — *once*, that's all. It didn't mean anything…"

"I'm sure it didn't to her. What's thirty seconds, one way or the other?"

"You don't have to be nasty about it."

The young woman sighed, blowing air into the mouthpiece. She took the last of her Virginia Slims from a crumpled pack and searched the night table for a match.

"Oh, I get it," she said, "it's *my* fault now. You didn't do anything. You weren't even there, right?"

"One mistake and you're cutting me off. Just like that. I thought we had something…"

"Maybe we did, but it's over."

The cigarette hung from her lips at an odd angle. When she lit it nothing happened. There was a break in the middle and a thin stream of blue smoke wafted up and into her eyes before reaching her mouth. She dropped the match into a full ashtray but kept the cigarette clamped so tightly between her teeth that the filter deformed into a flattened oval.

"Listen…" he said.

"You just don't get it, do you? What is there about this that you can't understand? *Finis.* Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"Do you hear this?"

On the other end of the line, there was a click.

She sighed again.

"It's one o'clock in the morning. Good night, Michael."

"Or *this?"* he said.

Then there was a second click, closer and sharper. It sounded like he had struck the mouthpiece with a pencil.

"What about it?" she said.

"That makes two out of six."

She opened her eyes and stared across the bedroom, trying to focus. The cigarette fell from her lips and onto the front of her nightgown. When she picked it up the teeth marks in the filter were so deep that it was bitten almost completely through, but she did not notice.

"Look, whatever your game is, I don't want to play, all right? I have go to work in six hours…"

"This isn't a game," he said. "It's a matter of odds."

"What is?"

"I'm betting that you won't throw it all away."

"Don't be stupid."

"Then come over."

"What for?"

"We'll talk it out."

"I told you, no!"

"One more and it's fifty-fifty."

There was something different about his voice now. The tone was no longer smooth and conciliatory. It was not even desperate. It was mocking.

31 She sat up straight.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm a gambler, Jeannie. Are you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I always liked roulette. Here goes…"

"Wait."

"I could come over there."

"Do that and I call the police."

"Then listen up."

"Why?"

"I want you to hear it. So you'll never forget."

There was a third click in her ear, as loud as a piece of metal snapping. It must have been right next to his mouth.

"Michael, stop this! Whatever you're — "

"You lucked out," he said. "This time."

"I'm hanging up."

"You know I love you, don't you?"

"Good-*bye!"*

She broke the connection.

She dialed another number almost immediately.

"Mara, it's me."

"What time is it?"

"Sorry to bother you. I know it's late…"

"What's wrong?"

"Michael."

"Is he there?"

"No. But he won't give up."

"Just a minute." There was a faint clicking as Mara turned on her lamp. "Now. What about Michael?"

"He wants to come over."

"The creep."

"I know. But he sounds like…"

"What?"

"I can't describe it. His voice isn't — normal."

"*He's* not normal. Get that through your head."

"He's doing something."

"Oh, dirty phone calls! Listen, girl, there's a law…"

"I just want him to leave me alone."

"I hear that."

"He's been calling all night."

"So take the phone off the hook."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid of what he might to do."

"To you?"

"To himself."

"So let him! At least you'll get a good night's sleep."

"I can't, now."

"He isn't worth it, Jeannie."

"But what if he — does something?"

"That's your ego talking. This isn't about you. It could be anyone. He just likes the melodrama."

"I think he means it this time."

"Listen. He's a manipulator. He's trying to dominate you. It's the old passive-aggressive bit — control is the name of the game. Take my advice and don't play. Cut it off right now. Clean."

"I tried that. Only…"

"Only *what?* He's gambling on your weakness. Be strong. Once he finds out he can't make you jump anymore, he'll lose interest. Trust me."

"Maybe I should see him one more time," she said after a pause. "Just to be sure."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. That he's okay."

"You're crazy!"

"He only cheated once…"

"How do you know that?"

"We always told each other everything."

"Oh, really?"

"Well…"

"If he did it before, he'll do it again."

"He says it didn't mean anything."

"Sure. It was just his prick. Like it doesn't even belong to him. He found it in his pocket and thought he better try it out. What the hell."

"It's different for men."

"You got that right. They're not human."

"What's her name?"

"No one you know. Some bimbo with roots. Just his type."

"I think he has a gun."

"Did he threaten you?"

"No."

"Then he's just blowing smoke. Where would he get a gun?"

"His father's a cop. Was. He blew his brains out when Michael was nine."

"Don't worry about it. He doesn't have the guts. Besides, it's none of your business now. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"I guess."

"You want to come over here?"

"I have to get up in the morning."

"Then take some NyQuil and zone out. Tomorrow you won't remember any of this."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Thanks, Mara."

"Anytime."

As soon as Mara put the phone down it rang again.

She tried to ignore it. She turned the TV on in her bedroom while the electronic chirping continued for another five minutes. When it finally stopped, she reached for the phone and punched in a series of numbers with such force that her long fingernail clicked against the keypad and left gouges in the plastic.

He answered right away.

"What is this bullshit about a gun?" she said.

"I knew it was you."

"You don't know jack shit. What are you trying to pull?"

"You talked to Jeannie."

"She's my best friend, remember?"

"I only called to see how she's doing."

"You lying sack of shit."

"I'm worried about her. I swear."

"Well, you can forget it. The girl is fine."

"Is that what she told you?"

"None of your business."

"She's unstable. When I told her I was through with her, she broke down."

"Give me a break!"

"We need to talk."

"You need to go fuck yourself."

"Just talk, that's all. I can be there in twenty minutes."

"You're certifiable, you know that?"

"What more do you want from me?"

"Don't even go there."

"Listen."

There was the sound of metal on metal.

"What are you doing?"

"Cocking the hammer."

"Don't you dare jerk me around! Your father was the one with the balls. Not you."

"This is number four."

"Michael — "

"One out of three, now. You like those odds?"

"Cut the crap or I'll call the cops! They'll put you in the psycho ward!"

"I only want to talk. You know I love you…"

"Go to hell."

She slammed down the phone.

He set the cordless telephone in front of him.

There was a notepad and pencil on the living room table, alongside a drinking glass, a fifth of Dewar's Scotch, a nickel-plated Smith & Wesson .38 Police Special and a box of Remington hollow-point cartridges. The top of the box was open. None of the rounds were missing.

He picked up the phone and entered a number.

When no one answered, he dialed a second number.

After a few minutes he put the handset down again, poured out an inch of the Scotch, held it up in the light from the lamp and emptied the glass.

Then he took the Smith & Wesson in one hand. He swung the cylinder out, spun it with his other hand and sighted through the chambers to be sure they were all empty, then snapped it closed.

He laid it on the table and studied the notepad before taking up the phone again.

This time he got an answering machine.

"Hi," he said. "I just wanted to see if you're all right. Oh, by the way, I didn't get the check. I thought you said you mailed it. If it doesn't get here by Wednesday, I'll have to come over. You don't want me to do that. Anyway, say hello to Dad for me. You know I love you, don't you, Mama?"

As he broke the connection, a white light swept over the front window.

He blinked and looked up.

Now red lights flashed on the other side of the curtains. They might have been taillights but it was hard to be sure.

He lifted the gun, opened it, inserted one of the cartridges and pointed the muzzle across the room.

A car door closed and footsteps started up the walk to the porch.

There was a knock on the door.

He drew the hammer back and waited, not moving a muscle.

The footsteps went away and passed along the side, down the driveway toward the back.

A moment later there was a click in another part of the house.

He turned around in his chair.

A shadow entered the living room from the kitchen.

He squinted into the darkness.

"Jesus," he said. "It's you."

"I used my key," she said.

"I thought you were going to call the cops."

"What do you think you're doing?"

"What do you care?"

She walked over to the table and stood looking down at him.

"I don't," she said. "I just wanted to be sure you're okay."

"I'm fine," he said, "now. I told you, it's over with her."

She saw the box of cartridges with one shell missing. "What the hell is this?"

"My dad's," he said.

"And this?" She reached for his arm under the table, where he had the pistol. "Give it to me."

"Want to play?"

"My God." Her eyes grew wide, then glassy as tears spilled down her cheeks. "It's true. Oh, my God."

He raised the gun.

She took a step back.

He eased the hammer back down, turned the gun around and held it out to her.

"Go ahead. If I can't have you, I don't care."

She snatched it from him and held it in front of her with both hands. Her knuckles were white.

"You're a player, aren't you?" he said. "It's still one out of two. Or two to one. I forget."

"I should do it," she said. She nodded at the pad and pencil. "What's that, your suicide note? Perfect! I must have been out of my head. I only went to bed with you because you were so pathetic, always crying about her…"

"I told you, it's over. We don't have to sneak around anymore."

"I should fucking do it." Her face twisted up and she started to sob. "But I can't. I just can't…"

He closed the box of ammunition and placed it in the drawer, tore the top sheet off the notepad before she could see what was written there, crumpled it and dropped it into the wastebasket. Then he got out of the chair and faced her.

She stared at him, her lips trembling.

He took the gun from her.

"Stay," he said.

She kept staring, her eyes so bright that they seemed to give off sparks.

"We can talk about it in the morning."

She flung her keys down so hard that they gouged the floorboards and skittered away into the darkness.

Then she turned and crossed to the bedroom.

"Thanks for coming over," he said. "I can't stand to be alone. You know I love you, don't you, Mara?"

She slammed the door.

He smiled and threw his head back, laughing silently.

He started for the bedroom with a bounce in his step.

When he was halfway there he stopped and returned to the table. He reached down into the wastebasket and retrieved the sheet of paper from the pad. On it was written a list of women's names, at least a dozen of them, with telephone numbers after each one.

He smoothed the paper and slipped it into the drawer.

Then, just to be sure, he stuck the gun into the waistband at the back of his trousers before he followed her into the bedroom, closing the door behind him with a gentle click.

Got to Kill Them All

The sky was getting darker all the time.

I set the red can under the glove box and drove away from the pumps, steering with one hand so I could gulp down some coffee. Then I hit the brakes before I got to the street.

The can worried me.

It was still upright but I heard the gas sloshing. There were a lot of turns between here and the house. What if it tipped over? I'd be sucking fumes before I got home.

I reached into the backseat, grabbed the plastic bag from B&B Hardware and wedged it next to the can. But it wasn't heavy enough. So I had to shut off the engine, climb out and make room in the trunk, between the spare tire and the suitcase. That way the can wouldn't move around no matter how fast I took the corners. I turned the key again and headed east on Washington, picking up speed, with only one question in my mind:

Which of the following is a Burt Reynolds film? (a) Cannonball Run, (b) Stroker Ace, (c) Smokey and the Bandit, or (d) The Night of the Following Day.

I couldn't remember the winning answer but it didn't matter now. The gas station was history.

The sky was so dark by now that I had a hard time believing it was still early afternoon. The clock on the dash said the same as my watch, a few minutes past three. Rush hour wouldn't be for a while yet. I changed lanes, weaving in and out, flexing my fingers till the joints popped, the sound like little arcs of electricity below the windshield. I thought I saw a barricade of squad cars at the next corner, colored lights spinning, but it was only a road crew setting out detour signs. Their red vests glowed in the underpass. I shook my head to clear it and noticed that the coffee was almost empty.

I worked my way over between the trucks and sport utility vehicles, heading for Venice Boulevard. It would have been a lot easier to take Sepulveda to Lincoln straight out of LAX. I'd be home now. But this way I had everything I needed. I could do the rest in my sleep. As I turned onto Venice another question flashed before me:

In what film does William Shatner appear? (a) The Intruder, (b) The Brothers Karamazov, (c) Big Bad Mama, or (d) Anatomy of a Murder.

That one was easy. It was from Day Two, Show Five, the one we had just wrapped. How many hours ago? I could still see the answer on the card in front of me. I pretended to play the game, jabbing the steering wheel as if it were a buzzer. The horn went off and he glanced up.

The first thing I noticed was that he might have been anyone.

A beach boy, nothing special, the type you see around here all the time. Sun-bleached hair, sweat collecting in his squinty eyes and a walk that said he was not going to slow down for anybody. He stepped into the street and one of us had to stop. I could tell by those eyes it had to be me. He glared back like a hot spot on the glass and didn't move.

Then he did something strange.

He folded his legs and sat down right there in the crosswalk, daring me to hit him. I didn't, of course. The light was red.

I opened the window.

"Hey, you want to move it?"

He shrugged. Not defiantly. He just didn't care.

Cars were stacked up behind me now and they didn't like this game. The light changed. I heard a horn tapping. For God's sake, I thought.

"What's your problem?"

When I leaned out his eyes got big.

"God, you're him!"

I shook my head. "Move your ass."

"Yeah! The guy on *Green!"*

Busted. I didn't even have my makeup on. Did I? No, that was hours ago, in Honolulu. I would have taken it off. I checked the rearview mirror. My eyes were like two cigarette burns. I had a hard time recognizing myself. The kid's legs unfolded as he got up. But not to move out of the way. He started walking toward me.

He was going to ask for my autograph.

The rest of the drivers leaned on their horns.

I had to make a decision fast so I unlocked the passenger door. I'd drive around the corner and dump him off once we were out of the intersection.

When he got in I took a close look at him. New Nikes, clean T-shirt and jeans, no dirt anywhere that showed. He was not a beach bum and he didn't really have an attitude. He had just plain given up. He probably didn't know he was going to until that moment and then something—the traffic, the sun,

all the people on the street who couldn't care less—made him lose it. Now I could see that it wasn't sweat under his eyes. He had been crying.

He closed the door and wiped his face. "Shit, I'm sorry. If I'da known it was you…"

"What happened?" I said.

"Oh, nothin'." He tried a laugh to make light of it. "My old lady. We had a, you know, fight. She kicked me out."

"Where?"

"Right here, in the middle of the street. Told me to fucking split. So I did."

"I understand," I said.

"You do?"

"She's a bitch."

"Well…"

"Sure, she is. Acts like you're always bothering her. No time to talk. When you call, she's never home."

"How did you know that?"

Which is proof that your wife is cheating? (a) Staying out all night, (b) mysterious stains on her clothing, (c) phone calls from someone who hangs up when you answer, or (d) frequent trips to see her "mother" in the hospital.

"They're all the same," I said. "Think about it."

"Yeah," he said, as if it had never occurred to him, "I guess they are…"

Now we were close to Admiralty Way and the grid of side-streets by the marina. It was hard to tell them apart in this light. Got to bear down, I thought.

"Where do you want me to drop you?"

"Wait," he said. "What do I do?"

What should you do once you know she is unfaithful? (a) Make her account for every hour of her day, (b) hire a private detective, (c) hide a Global Positioning Device in her car, or (d) kill her.

"Only one thing *to* do," I told him, "isn't there? How about the corner?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Where's your house?"

"I can't go back there."

"Maybe you should."

"Why?"

"To make it right."

"I don't know how."

"Yes, you do. Think about it."

"Okay. I will."

He squinted at the shadowy rows of condos as we neared the end of the boulevard. We both saw sparks of light like tiny fires starting between the buildings. It could have been the sun on the ocean except that the sky had closed over.

"I have to let you out," I said.

"Huh?"

"I can't take you with me. Not where I'm going."

"That's cool. The market, okay?" There was a Stop 'N Start ahead, at the corner. "I need some stuff."

That was cool with me. I could get a refill on my coffee, as long as it didn't take too long.

I pulled in between a brand-new Land Rover and an exterminator's truck. The mannequin on the roof had a tux and top hat and a big rubber mallet behind his back and he was standing over an innocent-looking mouse. On the way to the glass doors I saw the little rat out of the corner of my eye, twitching his whiskers and scooting away over the hood. Go on, I thought. You can run but you can't hide.

Inside the convenience mart I poured a big 22-ouncer, black. The kid was in the aisle where they keep the dog food and soap and aspirin and Tampax, for when you're running late and she gave you a list and you promised. I popped a lid on the coffee and left a dollar bill on the counter, thinking: *Which method is best for a crime of passion? (a) Gun, (b) rope, (c) knife, or (4) gasoline.*

"Good luck," I said over my shoulder.

The kid had a couple of household items in his hands. He must have wanted to do the pots and pans or something as soon as he got home. So he was going to try and make up after all. He could hardly wait. The poor bastard. I went out while he was paying for his stuff.

The mousemobile was gone. Now a pool-cleaner's truck was parked next to me, the kind I'd seen in the marina, sometimes in front of my own house even though our pool wasn't finished yet. I wondered if it was the same one. If it was, maybe I could do something right here before I drove off and took care of the rest.

Let's see, I thought.

I hadn't figured on this part and didn't have the right tools for the job. It wouldn't take much to give him the message, say a screwdriver stuck in a sidewall or the radiator, like a note on his windshield, only better. He'd know what it was for and look around and I'd be gone. Or I could wait for him to come out and see what his sorry ass looked like. Was he inside? I hadn't noticed. *What should you do to her lover? (a) Make his life a living hell, (b) tie him up and torture him, (c) castrate him, or (c) kill him.* But this was his lucky day. I wasn't sure.

Time to go.

The kid walked around and opened the passenger door like he wanted to get in.

"One question," he said.

"What?" I swallowed hot coffee, put the cap back on and took out my keys.

"Can I get on the show?"

"I don't have anything to do with that," I said, revving up.

"But if you put in a good word…"

"I'm out of here," I said. The sky went black like a shadow had passed over the earth. Night was ready to fall. I could feel it in my head. "Close the door."

"Okay," he said and got in.

Now he thought we were friends. He was really innocent. Like the Fool in a deck of cards, too busy smelling the flowers to notice that he's walking off a cliff. I didn't want to tell him the whole truth. He wouldn't be able to handle it.

"I guess you have to be pretty smart, anyway."

"Do you watch the show?"

"Every week!"

"Then you know the rules," I snapped. We were driving again and traffic was heating up. I couldn't waste any more time. "It's not what you know. It's what — "

"'You *don't* know!'" he finished for me. "That's so cool. All those other shows, you have to get the answer right. But on *Green*, one right answer and you're—"

"History," I said. "Look, I have to be somewhere."

"Sony Studios, Culver City, seven o'clock. Right?"

"Not tonight."

"But this is Friday…"

"We tape the shows in advance."

"You do?"

"Five a day. I just flew in from Hawaii. Yesterday San Francisco, Atlanta the day before, New York on Monday. A month in a week."

"Jesus, when do you sleep?"

"It's been awhile."

He held out his hand. "Ray Lands, right?"

"Lowndes."

"I thought you were live." He tried to give me some kind of brotherhood handshake but I got out of it.

"I used to be. Now they want it every night. We had to get some shows in the can."

"'Cause it's so popular?"

"Right."

He put his bag of household crap in the backseat, cheered up already, sure everything was going to work out. It didn't take much. Even if she threw him out again he could sleep under a blanket of stars and eat dates off the palm trees while he figured another way to get her back. That would be cool. Somebody needed to burst his bubble but I didn't want to be the one. I had things on my mind.

What is the best way to obtain satisfaction? (a) Catch her in the act and take pictures, (b) expose her betrayal on national television, (c) beat her within an inch of her life, or (d) tie her up and burn the house down.

"All ri-i-ght!" he said.

"What?"

He was still leaning over the seat and now he had his hand on the plastic bag from the hardware store. "You go to B&B, too! Over on Washington, right? They have everything. It's great, huh?"

"Great."

He reached into my bag and took out the long butane lighter. It balanced across his palm like a combat knife. He fingered the switch, ready to test it.

"I like these babies. For when you have to start a barbecue."

"Leave it," I told him.

"Duct tape, nails, rope…" He put the bag back down next to his. "Need to fix something?"

"Yeah."

"At your place?"

I stopped the car at the last corner.

"You better get out now."

"Oh, yeah." He took his bag from the backseat, then hesitated. "Need any help?"

"No."

A private security patrol car nosed out of the alley by the gate and sat there idling, the guard watching me behind tinted glass. I hovered for a minute while I downed the rest of the coffee and let it absorb into my bloodstream.

I could see the stars already through my eyelids and then the streaked sky over Waikiki Beach, the way it was outside the window of the hotel room when the storm started moving in, and my hand as I picked up the phone to call her for the hundredth time. I felt the rumbling of the surf. It sounded like a car engine. I opened my eyes and checked the mirror. So far there were no other patrol cars rolling up to block the way, only the one in the alley and while my eyes were closed he had camouflaged the front end so it looked like a trash can in the shadows. I saw waves churning in the marina. The water was blood-red.

"You sure?" the kid said. "I'm good with my hands."

I would have bet that he was. I considered. If she was alone I could handle it and if she was out that would give me time to get set up while I waited for her to come home. But if she was not alone there might be complications.

"Still want to be on the show?" I said.

"Sure. Ten million greenbacks!"

"It's easy. All you have to do is give the wrong answer. Prove that you're an asshole, in other words, like everybody else."

"I know."

"If I gave you something to hold, could you do that, and not ask any questions?"

"Like what?"

"What would you do if you saw a rat?"

"Um, kill it, I guess."

"That's right. You've got to kill them, don't you?"

"Hell, yeah."

"Then come on."

"Where are we going?"

"I want you to meet my wife."

He swung his legs back in and closed the door. "You'll put in the word?"

"Sure."

"When?"

"Next week."

"Cool!"

We drove around to the multi-level ranch houses at the end of Circle Vista.

"Uh, one thing," he said, "just so's you'll know. I'm not into anything weird."

"That's cool," I told him. "Neither am I."

Her lemon-colored car was in the driveway. I took the hardware store bag from the back and as I climbed out a curtain flapped shut in an upstairs window. The bedroom.

"Wait here," I said.

"You got it."

I started along the flagstone walk to the side of the house. Better check it out, I thought, before you bring the red can from the trunk, just to be sure. Before I got very far the front door squeaked open and I heard a voice.

"Ray…?"

I backtracked, holding the bag casually at my side.

"Hi, honey."

I waited for her to ad lib an excuse to keep me outside. Her eyes were puffy, almost swollen shut. She hadn't been getting much sleep, either.

"Ray, I'm so glad you're here!"

"Are you?"

"You don't know…"

"What's wrong?"

"It's Mother."

I nodded knowingly. "Your mother? I see. Is she still 'sick'?"

"She's…gone."

"Oh, really? Where did she go?"

"She passed away last night. This morning. I tried calling you from Kaiser but you'd already checked out. I don't know what to do. I have to make the arrangements…"

I dropped the plastic bag and held her off, feeling her wrists trembling, so thin I could snap them like chicken bones. She came at me again and struggled as I pushed her away. Then her face twisted up and she started sobbing. I grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off her feet, carrying her out of the yard before the neighbors could see our hysterical little scene. The only one who saw was the kid. He watched from the car, taking it in.

"What's wrong with you?" she screamed as the sirens started closing in.

Why is a mouse when it screams? I thought. *(a) Still shitting me, (b) scared shitless, (c) full of shit, or (d) shit out of luck…*

The next thing I remember is this:

She got her arms around my neck and then I wasn't fighting her anymore. I stood there feeling her lips against my neck and her breath was hot like a child's from the crying and my eyes finally closed all the way. And when they opened again it was like I was waking up.

I smelled her hair and tasted her skin and knew where I was. Everything else had been a dream. The sirens receded and there was only the quiet lapping of blue water behind our house. The weight lifted and the sky opened and there was light again and the pounding in my ears was her heart beating in my chest. Then her legs went out from under her and I had to hold very tightly to keep her feet from dragging as I pulled her inside.

I was sorry the kid had to witness any of this. He would have to walk home from here. I had a vague recollection of the bitter, twisted things I had said to him and felt ashamed. Someday he would understand how burned-out a man can get when he's really exhausted and wired and how bent out of shape things seem when you're like that, and maybe he'd forget this day. I had been out of my head. It can happen to anybody, I told myself.

Her clothes were so wrinkled she must have slept in them for days on a cold bench somewhere and her hair had come loose and there was no makeup on her pale face. I set her on the couch.

"I'm so sorry," I said and kissed her forehead.

"I have to call the funeral home…"

"Let me."

"And my brother — "

"I'll take care of it. Rest."

"Where are you going?"

"The phone. I'll be right there, in the kitchen. Okay?"

She nodded.

I found her brother's number by the phone. No answer. He was probably on his way. I'd try again in a few minutes if he didn't show up. The next thing would be to call the funeral home. I didn't know which one it was. I started back to the living room and heard her cry out suddenly, louder and more desperate. The sound stopped before I got there.

The kid moved in front of the couch to block my way.

"Everything's cool," he said.

"What is?"

Across the room the front door was still open. There were spatters on his clean white T-shirt. His bag from the convenience mart lay on the carpet with the contents spilling out: a blister pack of cheap steak knives, a roll of twine and a dispenser of wide package-sealing tape. In his hand was a pizza cutter.

She was where I had left her, only now her ankles were bound together with the twine, a piece of the tape covered her mouth and one of her arms dangled to the floor. Blood dripped from the wrist.

"I was gonna save my stuff," the kid said, "for when I get home. But I could tell you needed a hand."

I tried to get past him before the room became any blacker. He stepped aside and grinned.

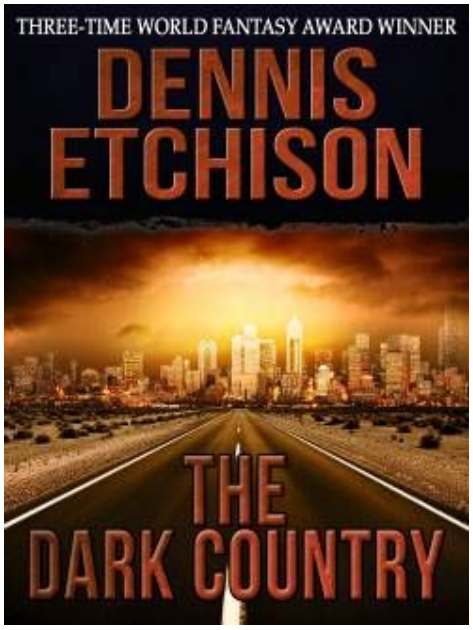
"You really got it down, man, about the bitches. I guess I always knew. There just isn't no other way…"

"What have you done?"

"What you said," and he winked at me, his eyes dancing wildly in his skull. "I mean, like, you got to kill them all. Right?"

Other Dennis Etchison eBooks Available from Crossroad Press

THE DARK COUNTRY



Etchison's fiction is justly famous for its creepy ambience, and explores the terrain mapped out by Philip K. Dick, Thomas Harris, and any number of black and white horror movies. This is his legendary first collection, carefully corrected by the author for this new edition. The title story won both the World Fantasy Award and the British Fantasy Award in 1982, the first time a single work received both major awards. Contents include 15 ground-breaking stories and an introduction by Ramsey Campbell.

Included in this collection:

It Only Comes Out at Night
Sitting in the Corner, Whimpering Quietly
The Walking Man
We Have All Been Here Before
Daughter of the Golden West
The Pitch
You Can Go Now
Today's Special
The Machine Demands a Sacrifice
Calling All Monsters

The Dead Line
The Late Shift
The Nighthawk
It Will Be Here Soon
Deathtracks
The Dark Country

"Dennis Etchison is one hell of a fiction writer, and if you have not read his volume of stories The Dark Country, you have missed one of the great volumes in our peculiar field. The stories are not just good; they are without exception exciting, and in some cases genuinely great." — Stephen King

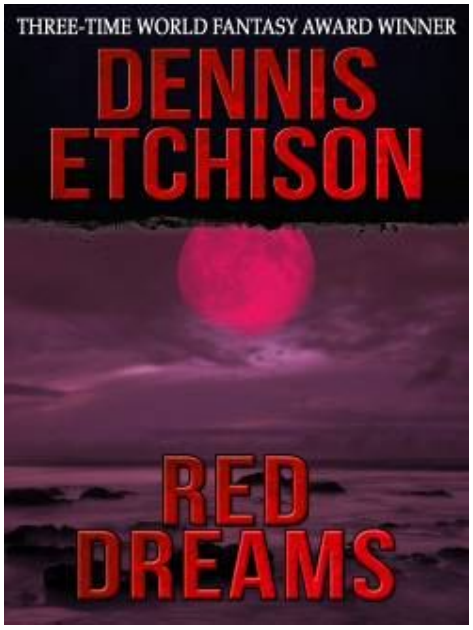
"The finest writer of psychological horror this genre has produced." — Karl Edward Wagner

"The best short story writer in the field today, bar none." — Charles L. Grant

"Dennis Etchison is the finest writer of short stories working in this field, and the rest of us ought to learn from him." — Ramsey Campbell

"The most original living horror writer in America." — The Viking-Penguin Encyclopedia

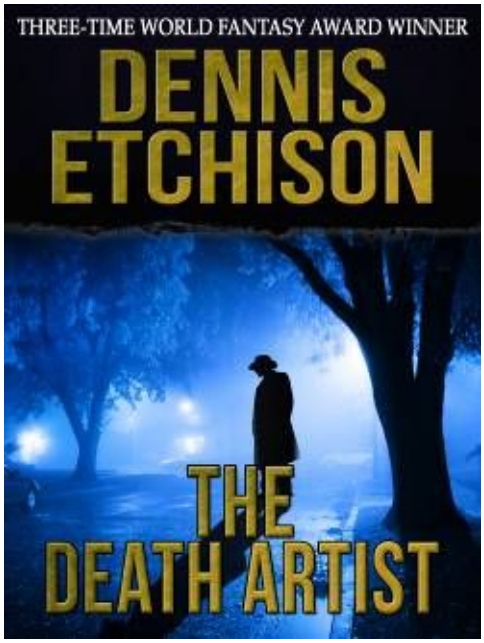
RED DREAMS



Featuring an Introduction by Karl Edward Wagner, Red Dreams is "A stunning collection of thirteen macabre stories by America's premier writer of horror" (Fantasy Newsletter). Included in this collection:

Talking in the Dark
Wet Season
I Can Hear the Dark
The Graveyard Blues
On the Pike
Keeper of the Light
Black Sun
White Moon Rising
The Chill
The Smell of Death
Drop City
The Chair
Not From Around Here

THE DEATH ARTIST



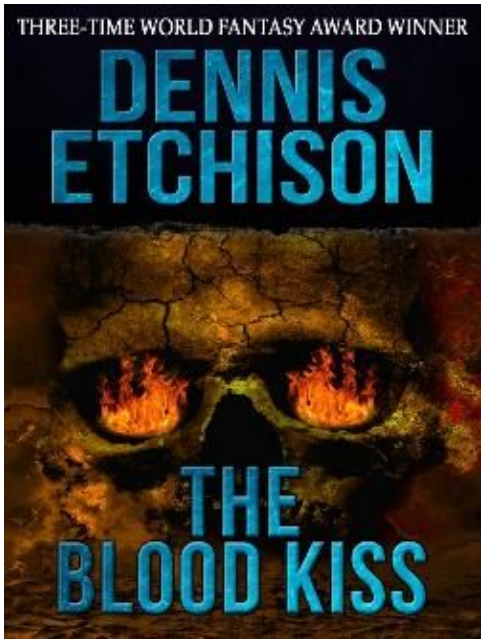
First published as a limited-edition hardcover (DreamHaven Books, 2000), The Death Artist presents 12 daring, unforgettable tales that define the state of the art in modern horror.

"You have seen him but you did not recognize him. When he passed you on the street you would not look his way. He stood with you in the line and took a seat as the lights went down but when you heard his footsteps later, going home, you told yourself he was not there. He is the one who sent the letter, the one on the telephone who never speaks, the one who waits behind the door. He stops for every accident and never turns away from the chalk marks and the blood, for there is a lifemap in each dying and if he does not see it all his portraits will not be true. He wants to pass it on, the laughter and the cry in the night, so much the same at the end. It is not a hobby or a diversion. It is a method and an esthetic and a religion. He does not seek to convert you. He only wants you to know. He thinks you are ready. He is an artist and his subject is the high and the low rather than what lies between. You do not have to find him. He has already found you…"

Contents:

The Dog Park
The Last Reel
When They Gave Us Memory
On Call
Deadtime Story
Call Home
No One You Know
A Wind From the South
The Scar
The Detailer
The Dead Cop
Inside the Cackle Factory

THE BLOOD KISS



Following his first two acclaimed collections, The Dark Country and Red Dreams, Etchison's much-anticipated third volume of wildly original stories continues to redefine modern horror. From the freeway off-ramps of Los Angeles to the darkest passages of the human heart, these are the visions of a writer whose imagination knows no boundaries.

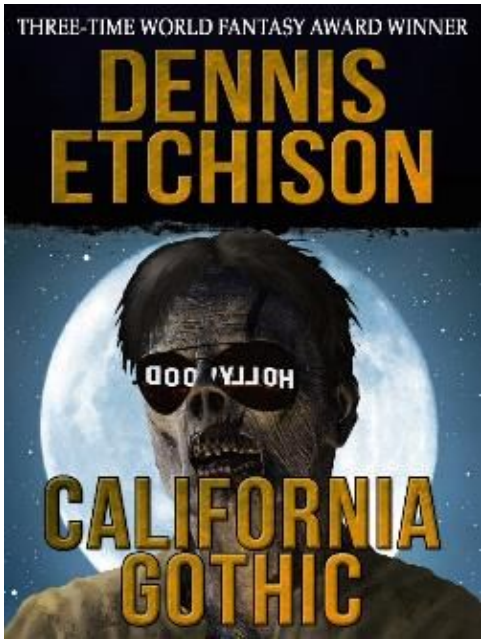
Published exclusively as a limited-edition hardcover in 1988, this legendary collection of dark fantasy tales is now available for the first time in 25 years.

Contents:
Call 666
A Nice, Shady Place
The Woman In Black
A Walk In the Wet
The Night of the Eye
The Spot
The Soft Wall
Somebody Like You

Bloodgame
Deadspace
Home Call
*"The Olympic Runner"
The Blood Kiss

*(British Fantasy Award: Best Short Fiction, 1987)

CALIFORNIA GOTHIC



The preeminent master of the modern American horror story takes a bold and unsettling turn in this 1995 study of Southern California suburbia, where things are not always as they seem and earthquake forces lie just below the surface of the San Fernando Valley. This new edition presents the author's preferred text.

"The prevailing tone is not darkness, but a relentless light: the light of the sun, of life, of unwelcome truth. As John Betjeman put it, this is the day that is worse than night. A taut, delicate, breathtaking performance... California Gothic glows with literate vision. Underlying this articulate, luminous novel is an angry challenge to received wisdom, not only about the horror genre but about the way we live."

— Joel Lane

"California Gothic embraces popular culture while simultaneously transcending it, blending the character-driven mainstream novel with elements of mystery, suspense and horror. The result is a psychological study of a depth seldom found in genre fiction, overlaid with a radical reinvention of the modern Gothic tale. Etchison carries it off with an

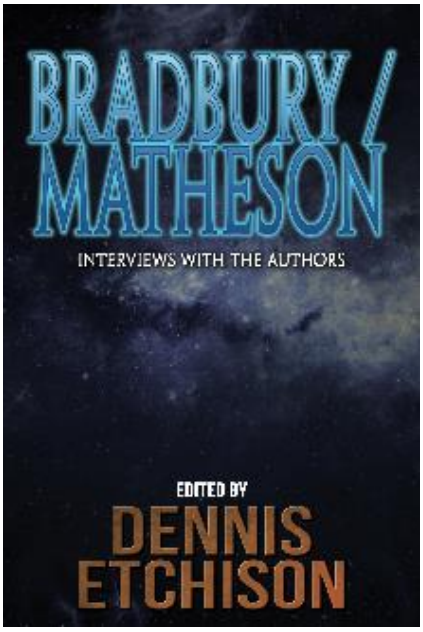
uncanny precision of language that is as clear as a mirage on the bright desert air. A stunning tour de force."

— Kent Allard

"The finest writer of psychological horror this genre has produced."

— Karl Edward Wagner

BRADBURY / MATHESON

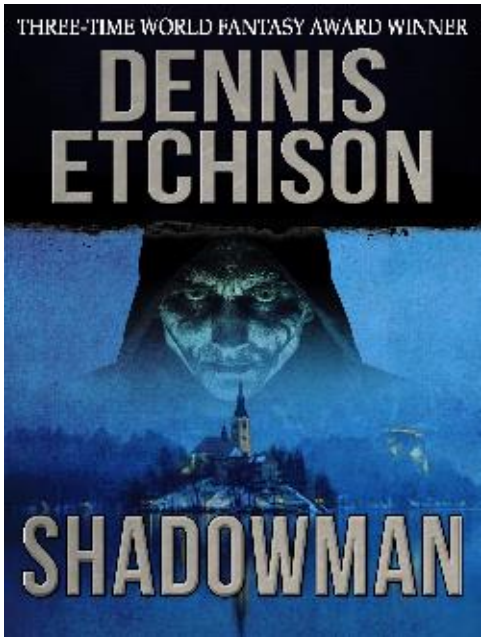


This unique volume collects two remarkable conversations. Ray Bradbury, one of America's most widely-read authors, speaks eloquently about his intense love of writing – and for the first time goes on the record about his adventures and misadventures in Hollywood. Richard Matheson was a major writer in science fiction, fantasy and horror, whose novel I Am Legend spawned the current zombie craze and whose classic Twilight Zone episodes have been seen by millions; this is the only personal, definitive account of his extraordinary career. These are verbatim, uncensored interviews with two literary giants, conducted by Dennis Etchison and transcribed without revisions, rewriting or polishing.

"Now that they are no longer able to speak to us directly about their lives and careers, it seems only right that they have the last word. Call it the

writer's cut." — Dennis Etchison

SHADOWMAN



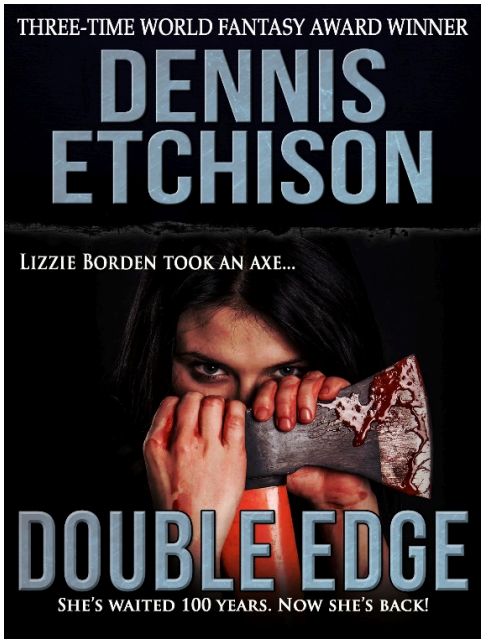
Shadowman, a sequel to the World Fantasy Award-winning story "The Dark Country," follows Jack Martin into an even deeper darkness in Shadow Bay, where the surf echoes against the shore, wild dogs howl and children tell ghost stories by firelight. Lissa Shelby works with disturbed children, and they are all afraid of the Man With No Face. The adults call him a fantasy — until the hills collapse under a torrent of rain and buried bodies pour forth. Only one thing is certain: no one is safe...

"Dennis Etchison is absolutely one of horror's most exciting, most radical and innovative talents, and Shadowman demonstrates all of his strengths — using a chaste, transparent style, he tells an innately horrifying story that catches the reader off-balance at every step by being starkly resistant to conventional expectations. This is fat-free horror, without maps, without easy transitions or resolutions. Shadowman would be a subversive book in any context, but in the safe, imitative world of contemporary horror, it is a kind of terrorist raid." — Peter Straub

"Dennis Etchison's writing is a disturbing marvel. Filled with perfection and loss; always delicate, heartbreaking. Its language is brilliant, its images and

moods dense with vision. This is a rich novel, gifted by thoughtful turns; haunting ease. It is upsetting and powerful." — Richard Cristian Matheson

DOUBLE EDGE


THREE-TIME WORLD FANTASY AWARD WINNER
DENNIS ETCHISON
LIZZIE BORDEN TOOK AN AXE...
DOUBLE EDGE
SHE'S WAITED 100 YEARS. NOW SHE'S BACK!

Jenny and Lee Marlow are Hollywood writers. After years of research, they have finally solved the infamous Lizzie Borden case. But now Jenny's sanity — and her survival — are at stake, as the killings begin again. Is someone copying the bloody crimes of a century ago...or is the axe-murderess alive in modern-day Los Angeles?

This terrifying novel offers a brilliant solution to America's most famous unsolved murders, leading to a blood-drenched climax of horror and suspense.

"The most original living horror writer in America. In both subject matter and style, he has forged a contemporary horror milieu as new and daring as the film nightmares of David Cronenberg." — *The Viking-Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural*

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